

Taiwan defence chief says no signs China is preparing for war

Reuters | Taipei

There are no signs that China is preparing for all-out war with Taiwan, such as massing troops along its eastern coast, Taiwan's defence chief said yesterday, after repeated Chinese drills near the island that China claims as its own.

Democratic Taiwan has denounced China's manoeuvres, including flying fighter jets over the sensitive mid-line of the Taiwan Strait, as an attempt at intimidation.

"The Chinese communists have continued their acts of provocation against Taiwan, but there are currently no signs showing it is ready to launch a full-scale war," Defence Minister Yen De-fa told parliament.

One sign of an imminent attack would be if troops from inland parts of China began massing along its east, but there are no indications that is happening, he added.

Taiwan's own forces are maintaining peacetime combat preparedness and have not stepped up their alert status, Yen said. Nevertheless he vowed a fight to the last man to defend the island's sovereignty and democracy.

Last week, in an apparent warning to China, the defence ministry said Taiwan's armed forces have the right to self-defence and counterattack amid "harassment and threats". Taiwan's military is well armed and well trained, but dwarfed by that of China's, which is busy adding advanced new equipment.

Russian scientist behind COVID-19 vaccine defends 'wartime' roll-out

Reuters | Moscow

Russia plans to share preliminary results of its COVID-19 vaccine trial based on the first six weeks of monitoring participants, raising the tempo in an already frenzied global race to end the pandemic.

Alexander Gintsburg, head of the Gamaleya Institute that produced the Sputnik V vaccine, told Reuters that the pace of its development was necessary under the "wartime" conditions of a pandemic but no corners were being cut.

Russia has pushed ahead with its potential COVID-19 vaccine at top speed with mass public vaccinations alongside the main human trial, raising concerns among some observers that it was prioritizing national prestige over solid science and safety. "People are dying just like during a war," said Gintsburg, holding a crystal model of a coronavirus in his hand.



Defender of Arab unity

Kuwait mourns Emir Sheikh Sabah



Sheikh Sabah speaks during a meeting at the Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) summit at the Foreign Ministry in Bangkok, Thailand

● Condolences poured in from across the Arab world, and several countries

● Crown Prince Sheikh Nawaf al-Ahmad al-Sabah is the successor

● The emir had been in hospital in the United States since July following a surgery

Reuters | Kuwait

Kuwait plunged into mourning yesterday for a leader regarded by many Gulf Arabs as a savvy diplomatic operator and a humanitarian champion.

Emir Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah who died at the age of 91 had ruled the kingdom since 2006 and steered its foreign policy for more than 50 years.

His designated successor is his brother, Crown Prince Sheikh Nawaf al-Ahmad al-Sabah. "With the utmost sadness and grief for the Kuwaiti people, the Islamic and Arab world and people of friendly nations, the Emiri Diwan mourns the death of Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah, the emir of Kuwait," his office said.

The emir had been in hospital in the United States since July



US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo Shakes hands with Sheikh Sabah in Kuwait City

following surgery for an unspecified condition in Kuwait that same month.

Sheikh Sabah sought to balance relations with Kuwait's bigger neighbours -- forging the closest ties with Saudi Arabia, rebuilding links with former occupier Iraq and keeping open dialogue with Iran.

He tried to mediate in a Gulf dispute that saw Riyadh and its allies impose a boycott on Qatar, and made fundraising for humanitarian aid in Syria one of Kuwait's priorities.

Condolences poured in from across the Arab world, and several countries in the Gulf and wider region announced mourning periods.

"Today we lost a big brother and a wise and loving leader .. who spared no effort for Arab unity," Jordan's King Abdullah

said in a Twitter post.

There was no immediate official announcement of the succession process but diplomats have said they expect Sheikh Nawaf, 83, to assume power as heir in a smooth transition.

A succession is not expected to affect oil policy or foreign investment strategy through the Kuwait Investment Authority, one of the world's biggest sovereign wealth funds. Oil policy is set by the Supreme Petroleum Council, appointed by the emir.

The new emir's choice of crown prince and prime minister -- who would be tasked with managing the government's often difficult relationship with parliament -- will be watched closely, especially at a time when Kuwait's finances have been strained by low oil prices and the coronavirus pandemic.

Keep shark tooth, Malta tells Britain's Prince George



Britain's Prince William and Cathrine, Duchess of Cambridge, Prince George, Princess Charlotte and Prince Louis with David Attenborough, in London

Reuters | Valletta

Malta, making a rapid U-turn, said yesterday Britain's Prince George was welcome to keep a fossilised shark tooth that was given to him by veteran naturalist Sir David Attenborough.

The 23-million-year-old fossil was discovered by Attenborough in Malta when he was holidaying on the Mediterranean island in the 1960s.

He gave it to George, 7, at the weekend, raising the hackles of some Maltese, who thought the tooth should be returned to them. Culture Minister Jose Herrera said on Monday he would "set the ball rolling" in retrieving the tooth, but the plan rapidly ran aground.

"It is not (our) intention to pursue this matter any further," a ministry spokesman said, without giving any explanation for the abrupt change of heart.

Herrera's move on Monday had raised some negative comments on social media, with critics pointing out that fossilised teeth of megalodon sharks can be bought for less than 50 euros.

Matthew Caruana Galizia, son of anti-corruption journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia, who was murdered in Malta three years ago, wrote on Twitter that Herrera should be campaigning to tackle graft rather than try to take a present from a child.

Thai army chief pledges defence of monarchy

Reuters | Bangkok

Thailand's new army chief pledged on Tuesday to follow his predecessor, who has taken a hard line against anti-government groups and he emphasised the importance of protecting the monarchy.

The appointment of General Narongpan Jittkaewtae, in

an annual military reshuffle, comes as Thailand's army and palace dominated establishment faces the challenge of months of anti-government protests. Narongpan made no specific mention of the protesters, some of whom have called for reforms to curb the powers of King Maha Vajiralongkorn's monarchy.

Meghan loses latest court battle with UK newspaper

Reuters | London

Meghan, Britain's Duchess of Sussex, has lost the latest skirmish in her privacy lawsuit against a tabloid newspaper, after London's High Court ruled on Tuesday the paper could amend its case to include details from a recently published biography.

Meghan, wife of Queen Elizabeth's grandson Prince Harry, is suing publisher Associated Newspapers over articles the Mail on Sunday printed last year that included parts of a handwritten letter she sent to her estranged father, Thomas Markle, in August 2018.

Ahead of a trial due to start next year, the Mail had applied for permission to amend its case, arguing that the couple had cooperated with a biography about them, "Finding Freedom", which was published in August.

The paper's lawyers said that showed that Meghan had intended some private details to become public, including the contents of the letter.

The judge, Francesca Kaye, said that while she made no view on the strength of the



Britain's Meghan, Duchess of Sussex

Mail's case, the amendments could not be said to be "unarguable or utterly fanciful".

The trial is scheduled to start on Jan. 11 and to last between seven and 10 days.

Harry and Meghan now live in California, having stepped down from their senior royal roles in March.

Meghan's legal team has budgeted just under 1.8 million pounds (\$2.3 million) for the case, while the Mail's costs are estimated at more than 1.2 million pounds.