

Australia honors Indonesian leader on historic visit



Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono is congratulated by Governor General Quentin Bryce after being appointed an Honorary Companion in the General Division of the Order of Australia, at Government House, in Canberra, Australia, March 9. (AP)

CANBERRA: Indonesia's president was handed Australia's highest civilian honor on Tuesday as he arrived for a historic visit expected to help bury tensions and fight people-smuggling and extremism.

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was greeted by a 21-gun salute and a military band as he flew into Canberra, with Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and Governor-General Quentin Bryce waiting on the red carpet.

Yudhoyono, who will become the first Indonesian leader to address a joint sitting of Australia's parliament on Wednesday, was later appointed an honorary companion of the Order of Australia for his work after the 2002 Bali bombing.

"President Yudhoyono is a true friend of Australia. Under his leadership, the relationship between our two nations has grown stronger," Rudd said.

He added that Wednesday's speech would be an "important milestone" between the neighboring countries, which are frequently at odds but hope to expand two-way trade of 9.3 billion dollars (8.5 billion US dollars).

"Tomorrow will symbolize how far we have come and how we are both committed to taking this relationship even further," Rudd told parliament.

"We are working together to tackle challenges like people-smuggling, trans-national crime and people-trafficking. We are also close partners in the fight against terrorism," he added.

Foreign Minister Stephen Smith acknowledged problems between the sprawling, mainly Muslim archipelago of 230 million, and his Western-focused country of 22 million, separated by just a couple of hundred miles (kilometers) of sea.

"Because we are such close neighbors there will always be issues," Smith told Sky News.

"But the strength of the relationship these days is that we can have issues which may well be difficult, whether it's issues of capital punishment, people smuggling or the Balibo Five for example."

Australia has long complained over the transit of rickety people-smuggling boats via Indonesia, including dozens in recent months that have stretched Australia's main immigration centre to breaking point. -AFP

North Korea has medium-range missile division

SEOUL: North Korea has recently created an army division in charge of newly developed intermediate-range missiles capable of striking US forces in Japan and Guam, a South Korean news agency said Tuesday.

The report came as North Korea stepped up its war rhetoric against the US and South Korea after the allies started their annual drills aimed at improving their defense capabilities.

The North's People's Army recently launched a division supervising operational deployment of missiles with a range of more than 1,860 miles (3,000 kilometers) that it had developed in recent years, Yonhap news agency reported citing an unidentified South Korean government source.

The missiles could pose a threat to US forces in Japan, Guam and other Pacific areas that are to be redeployed in time of emergency on the Korean peninsula, Yonhap said. The report, however, didn't provide further details such as how many missiles the new division possesses and where they are positioned.

South Korea's Defense Ministry said Tuesday it couldn't confirm the Yonhap

report. However, a ministry document published last year showed that the North deployed a new type of medium-range missile believed to be the same as one it displayed during a military parade in 2007.

If confirmed, the division's launch could suggest that the North has succeeded in developing more medium-range missiles since 2007 and it needed a bigger unit to manage them, said Ohm Tae-am of the state-run Korea Institute for Defense Analyses in Seoul. The division's creation would also mean the North has a unit whose primary role is to prevent the US from redeploying its troops in the Pacific to the Korean peninsula in the event of a conflict, said Baek Seung-joo of the same institute.

North Korea's missile program and nuclear weapons development program are major regional security concerns.

The North conducted a long-range rocket test in April in violation of a UN Security Council resolution that prohibits the country from engaging in any ballistic missile-related activities. A defiant Pyongyang subsequently quit nuclear disarmament talks and performed a second

nuclear test.

The United Nations responded in July by imposing punishing new sanctions that toughened an arms embargo on the country and authorized ship searches on the high seas.

On Tuesday, the North continued its salvo against the US and South Korea over their military drills, which the regime has long slammed as a rehearsal for invasion.

"This cannot be interpreted otherwise than a grave provocation," the North's Foreign Ministry said in a statement. It said the North will continue to bolster its nuclear capability as long as the US military threats persist. The ministry, however, said the North is ready for both dialogue and war, a position that contrasts from a military statement Sunday that the North would break off dialogue with the US in response to the drills.

About 18,000 American soldiers and an undisclosed number of South Korean troops are taking part in 11 days of drills that began Monday across South Korea.

The US, which has 28,500 troops in South Korea, has said the drills are purely defensive. -AP

China warns US against selling F-16s to Taiwan

BEIJING: China on Tuesday warned the United States against any future arms sales to Taiwan, including F-16 fighter jets the island has been pushing for in hopes of upgrading its air defense capabilities.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Qin Gang said China is firmly opposed to US sales of weapons to Taiwan, the self-ruled island that the communist government in Beijing regards as part of its territory and has vowed to conquer by force if necessary.

Asked to comment on reports that Taiwan is pushing to buy F-16s from the United States, Qin said Beijing hoped the US would "take China's position seriously and respect China's core interests and major concerns."

Incensed by the January announcement that the US planned to sell 6.4 billion US dollars in weapons to Taiwan, Beijing suspended military exchanges with the US and has threatened to

retaliate against US aerospace firms involved in the deal.

Since Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou came into office in May 2008, Taiwan has consistently pressed the United States to supply it with 66 F-16 C/Ds, an upgrade on its present inventory of F-16 A/Bs.

The issue was underscored last month when a Pentagon report painted a grim picture of Taiwan's air defense capabilities, saying that many of the island's 400 combat aircraft would not be available to help withstand an attack from rival China.

Many observers saw the study as justification for the possible sale of advanced fighter jets to Taiwan. The US says the F-16 request remains under study.

Despite rapidly warming relations with Beijing, Taiwan maintains that it needs state-of-the-art weaponry from the US to help it counter China's threat to attack. -AP



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