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Defense Ministers End Brunei Meeting with Joint Declaration	1
Energy Innovation Will Balance Climate Change Harm.....	2
Global Norms Demand Response to Chemical Weapons Use.....	2
Secretary Kerry Calls for Accountability on Syrian Chemical Attack.....	3
Tuberculosis Genes Reveal Secrets to Disease Success.....	4

Defense Ministers End Brunei Meeting with Joint Declaration

By Cheryl Pellerin | American Forces Press Service |
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Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei – Eighteen defense ministers from nations throughout the Asia-Pacific region sat together after their meeting here today, each in turn signing a joint declaration that reaffirms their commitment to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and to working together peacefully and cooperatively for a better future.

Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel was among them, having traveled here as part of an Asian trip – his second in three months – that also includes stops in Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines.

Yesterday, Hagel attended a meeting here of defense ministers from the 10 ASEAN member states of Burma, Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. He also held bilateral meetings with counterparts from several other nations.

This morning, he attended the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus, made up of the 10 ASEAN defense ministers and eight dialogue partners: defense ministers from the United States, China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, India, New Zealand and Russia.

This year, Russia's deputy defense minister, Anatoly Antonov, participated in the ADMM-Plus meeting.

"I see this second ministerial of the ADMM-Plus as a landmark event," Hagel said in remarks prepared for delivery during the meeting.

"In 2010, when then-Secretary [Robert M.] Gates joined you, our countries committed to making the ADMM-Plus action-oriented," Hagel said. "Under ASEAN leadership, we are well on our way, with three multinational field exercises this year – a major accomplishment. I am proud that the United States has been a partner and participant all along the way."

After the signing of the Bandar Seri Begawan Joint Declaration, Mohammad Yasmin Bin Umar, chairman of this second meeting of the ADMM-Plus, discussed key outcomes. He said the group was pleased with its substantial achievement this year, especially the five ADMM-Plus expert working groups that have forged political cooperation among defense forces.

"This is evident with the first-of-its-kind ADMM-Plus humanitarian assistance/disaster relief and military medicine exercise held in Brunei Darussalam last June," he said. An upcoming exercise will be held on maritime security, counterterrorism and peacekeeping operations, he added, and the group decided last year that ADMM-Plus would begin meeting every two years rather than every three years.

Yasmin said the group reaffirmed the principle of ASEAN centrality, where ASEAN is the primary driving force in the ADMM-Plus processes.

"We also reaffirmed our relation to be guided by the fundamental principle enshrined in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation," he said, "especially reunification of the threat of the use of force and exercise of self-restraint."

The group recommitted to strengthen defense cooperation in promoting peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region, he added, based on the enduring principle of equality, mutual respect, mutual benefit, and respect for international law.

"In doing so," Yasmin said, "we agreed to promote capacity building through greater engagement and interaction, enhance interoperability through training and joint exercises, and establish mechanisms for effective response."

He said the defense ministers also agreed to establish practical measures for reducing vulnerability to miscalculation and avoid misunderstanding and undesirable incidents at sea.

"We also agreed on the establishment of the ADMM-Plus Expert Working Group on Humanitarian Mine Action and on the transition process of the ADMM-Plus Expert Working Group on Co-chairmanship," Yasmin said. "Our senior official will develop a work plan and key milestones for the next cycle that begins in April 2014."

A new ADMM-Plus initiative will promote capacity building through a humanitarian aid/disaster relief tabletop exercise and mine action workshop, he said. And the group will reaffirm the direction of the ASEAN leader during the association's summit in May to promote synergy among regional mechanisms, including those of ADMM-Plus and the ASEAN Regional Forum.

The group also extensively discussed international and regional security and defense issues, and plans to meet again in Malaysia in 2015, he said.

In his remarks, Hagel said the ADMM-Plus is setting the right example with coordinated approaches to transnational and nontraditional threats.

"Pirates and terrorists, proliferators, diseases, natural disasters, and cyber criminals are not contained by national borders, and they will jeopardize all of our futures if we fail to act together," the secretary said.

"Working together develops regional capacity and the habits of cooperation we need to solve today's complex problems," he said. "Exercising together builds trust and understanding, and reduces the risk of conflict when disputes arise."

Energy Innovation Will Balance Climate Change Harm

By Charlene Porter | Staff Writer | 29 August 2013

Washington — U.S. innovation in energy-efficient and low-carbon technologies is moving at a steady pace, and Obama administration policies are aimed at further accelerating that speed as part of the recently announced strategy toward a low-carbon economy.

Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz said administration strategies for encouraging development of alternate technologies have contributed to a strong rate of progress and advancement in technologies that seemed risky just a few years ago. The Obama administration official spoke in New York August 27.

Since the 2008 economic downturn and the resulting federally funded recovery plan, government-supported incentives have helped drive down the price of emerging low-carbon energy technologies, Moniz said, and speed up innovation in more energy-efficient devices and practices.

"We are also innovating in how we stimulate innovation," Moniz said. "And I think these are extremely promising programs," the secretary told an audience at the Columbia University Center on Global Energy Policy.

Moniz focused on rapid progress in four areas: deployment of wind and solar generation capacity; development of photovoltaic technology used with solar energy; cost reduction and increased sales of long-lived, super-efficient light bulbs; and the development and sales of electric vehicles and batteries.

In all four of these areas, Moniz presented data showing "dramatic cost reduction, dramatic deployment [and] deployment increases."

Innovation is surging into the marketplace faster than many experts predicted in these four areas. "There is still often a persistent idea that these [technologies] are somehow decades away," Moniz said, while this recent progress demonstrates that the future may arrive sooner than some expect.

Another important component of the administration climate change policy unveiled in June is to mitigate damage that might be done by rising sea levels and the extreme weather events that lie ahead, according to models of climate change impact.

Moniz discussed this part of the administration plan before a New York City audience, where the memory of an October 2012 superstorm remains fresh, and the damage it caused is still being repaired. Acknowledging that tying a direct link between any single weather event and the greater trends of climate is difficult, the energy secretary said Superstorm Sandy, as the event is known, was consistent with the prediction that extreme weather events could become more severe, doing more damage both human and material.

As officials and publics in the U.S. Northeast make decisions on repairing the 2012 damage, Moniz said, they must be mindful of fiercer storms to come.

"It's about building smart, as we re-address the infrastructure and use this, perhaps, as an opportunity to develop the 21st-century infrastructure," Moniz said.

Climate change models call for more extreme storms in some regions, but severe and prolonged drought in others. That too, is a consequence unfolding in real time, Moniz said, as wildfires ravage the western United States and threaten the water delivery systems of major cities in the region.

President Obama unveiled a plan in June to put the United States on the road to a carbon-free economy, outlining a series of actions that will be taken by government agencies in the years ahead. One major regulatory change will require reducing greenhouse gas emissions from coal-burning power-generating plants. The plan calls for a 17 percent reduction from 2005 levels by 2020, and steeper reductions in successive years.

Contrary to some assessments and critics of the plan, Moniz said, this proposal should not be considered an assault on the use of coal. Rather, the proposal will support greater innovation in methods to reduce carbon dioxide emissions.

Global Norms Demand Response to Chemical Weapons Use

By Charlene Porter | Staff Writer | 27 August 2013

Washington — The United States has a national security stake in defending international prohibitions on the use of chemical weapons. Syria's apparent "flagrant violation" of that standard demands a response, according to White House spokesman Jay Carney.

President Obama is now engaged in deciding what that response will be in ongoing consultations with international partners and leaders of the U.S. Congress. "There will be a response," Carney said at a White House briefing August 27, expressing the administration's conviction that a chemical weapons attack did occur in neighborhoods around Damascus August 21.

Carney said the administration is certain that the Syrian government has chemical weapons, has maintained their security through the conflict and has the capability to deliver them.

"The opposition does not," Carney said. "Suggestions that there is any doubt about who is responsible for this are as preposterous as suggestions that the attack itself didn't occur," Carney said.

While the president continues to weigh the possible options, including military options, Carney made clear that the objective of any action would not be a regime change. Any U.S. response will be about upholding the agreement of 189 nations, "representing 98 percent of the world's people," that chemical weapons use is a violation of international law.

Carney repeated the longstanding U.S. position that the two-year-old conflict in Syria must be resolved with a political solution, one that does not include President Bashar al-Assad in power.

The spokesman also said it is not expected that the United States would respond with a deployment of ground troops into the region.

President Obama had conversations August 27 on a response to the chemical attacks with Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, British Prime Minister David Cameron, French President François Hollande and Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd.

The State Department announced over the last several days that Secretary of State John Kerry has been involved in far-reaching consultations with U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, European Union High Representative Catherine Ashton and Arab League Secretary General Nabil Elaraby. In the days since the attack, Kerry has also spoken to counterparts in the United Kingdom, France, Canada, Germany, Russia, Jordan, Qatar, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Italy, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

The Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons – known in the abbreviated form of CWC – is an almost 20-year-old agreement to which 189 nations have agreed. Syria is not one of them.

The CWC is devoted to the elimination of the entire category of chemical weapons by prohibiting the development, production, acquisition, stockpiling, retention, transfer or use of chemical weapons by the nations who are party to the treaty. All member states have agreed to enforce the treaty in their jurisdictions, destroy any weapons in their arsenals and destroy the facilities that produced them.

Secretary Kerry Calls for Accountability on Syrian Chemical Attack

By Charlene Porter | Staff Writer | 26 August 2013

Washington – Secretary of State John Kerry said August 26 that there must be accountability for the suspected chemical weapons attacks that occurred August 21 in Syria. The Obama administration is in active consultation with allies about what the international response should be.

Speaking to journalists at the State Department, Kerry said the Syrian government's denials of responsibility for the attacks are not credible. Nor, he said, has the government of President Bashar al-Assad behaved transparently since the incidents horrified the world in online video postings. Instead, Syria's government has continued shelling attacks on the site, destroying any evidence of what happened.

That is "not the behavior of a country with nothing to hide," Kerry said. Reports of attacks August 26 on U.N. weapons inspectors headed to the site "and continued shelling of these very neighborhoods" only further weaken the regime's credibility, he said.

Kerry described the attacks in blunt terms that are rare in the distilled lexicon of diplomacy. He called them a "moral obscenity" that "defies any code of morality." The human damage done by the weapons – as seen in the spasms and paralysis of the recorded victims – is so dreadful that the world has committed to the international ban on their use.

While an intelligence assessment continues, the United States is fully convinced that chemical weapons were used. Evidence is not yet conclusive that the Syrian government is responsible for their deployment, a State Department representative later clarified, but considerable evidence does point to responsibility of the Assad government. The United States dismisses Syria's attempt to place responsibility for the attacks on any other group involved in the 2-year-old conflict.

Kerry said international agreements that ban chemical weapons are binding commitments made among nations that agree upon little else. The promise of consequences is an element of those international treaties.

U.N. weapons inspectors must still compile the evidence, but “irrefutable facts” regarding the numbers of victims and their conditions upon death point to Syrian government involvement, Kerry said.

Independent, corroborated reports from humanitarian medical workers in the region also point to government responsibility for the weapons deployment. The humanitarian organization Doctors Without Borders announced August 26 that reports from hospitals in the region with which it has relationships point to a chemical weapons attack.

The symptoms of the patients, their numbers and the timing of their arrival for care all “strongly indicate mass exposure to a neurotoxic agent,” according to the organization’s statement.

“Our basic sense of humanity is offended,” Kerry said.

The Obama administration’s discussions with the international community about the nature of a response are ongoing. President Obama has “a range of options,” according to spokeswoman Marie Harf, and a decision is forthcoming.

Tuberculosis Genes Reveal Secrets to Disease Success

By Charlene Porter | Staff Writer | 23 August 2013

Washington — The bacteria that cause tuberculosis have plagued humankind for millennia, but scientists are just getting to know the pathogen at the genetic level. Research published August 21 offers insight into how this microscopic organism is so successful at causing human disease and death.

Analyses of dozens of tuberculosis genomes from disease strains gathered around the world offer clues on why TB is so prevalent and how it evolves to defend against human attempts to fight it.

“It’s as though the bacterium places bets on human behavior,” said Caitlin Pepperell, a University of Wisconsin-Madison microbiologist who is the lead author on the work published in PLOS Pathogens. The TB bacterium “always bets that humans will go to war, send people to refugee camps and gather in miserable places. Historically, that’s been a winning bet on the bacterium’s part.”

These are conditions in which TB thrives. The pathogen is transmitted only by humans and cannot survive in the environment on its own. TB has proven to be the greatest threat in the crowded conditions of prisons, slums and refugee camps.

That survival technique has enabled TB to follow humans

over the last several centuries and flourish in historical periods marked by urbanization, migration and expansion into new territories, the researchers find.

The World Health Organization (WHO) calls TB the world’s second most deadly disease pathogen after HIV, causing 1.4 million deaths in 2011 and 8.7 million cases of illness.

The research team — which included scientists from Stanford University, the University of Iowa, the University of Sydney and the Broad Institute, which is supported by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University — analyzed the genetic diversity of 63 TB strains and related pathogens.

The scientists found that the disease strains had two common characteristics that contribute to longevity. They are very good at casting off mutations that are harmful to their survival, while they are tolerant of beneficial mutations that strengthen their defensive genes. Mutations that allow the organism to fend off attacks from the human immune system or resist the pharmacological onslaught of medications are readily adapted.

Those traits have apparently contributed to TB’s great longevity, Pepperell said. “It must have some incredibly clever strategies and tricks to hang on.”

These observations about the TB genome will provide the platform for further research, Pepperell expects, because they will help other researchers identify vulnerabilities that could be new drug targets. The U.S. National Institutes of Health provided funding for the work conducted by Pepperell and her colleagues.

More than 95 percent of TB deaths occur in low- and middle-income countries, where it is among the top three causes of death for women aged 15 to 44.

After concerted efforts to improve treatment access by the United States and other donor nations, the TB death rate is down by 41 percent between 1990 and 2011, WHO reports.

Through this period, an estimated 20 million lives have been saved through use of a TB-stopping strategy recommended by WHO. The estimated number of people falling ill with tuberculosis each year is declining, although very slowly. Based on that trend, predictions indicate that the world is on the way to achievement of a goal to reverse the spread of TB by 2015.

Under the Obama administration’s Global Health Initiative, the United States is committed to contributing to that goal, as well as supporting TB testing and

treatment for millions of vulnerable individuals worldwide.

(This is a product of the Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State. Web site: <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov>)