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China opens port to U.S. Navy

HONG KONG (AP) — In the largest American port call since a spy plane crisis soured U.S.-Chinese relations, thousands of sailors came to Hong Kong aboard seven warships Monday — to the relief of merchants whose businesses have been hurt by the chill.

Beijing barred U.S. port calls following NATO's bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999 and again after the U.S. spy plane collided with a Chinese fighter jet in April, killing the Chinese pilot and causing a major U.S.-Chinese standoff.

Last week, China barred another U.S. Navy spy plane, a P-3C Orion patrol plane, from landing in Hong Kong on a training mission. Beijing gave no reason for the refusal.

The arrival of the aircraft carrier USS Constellation was good news for merchants who depend on military visits for a substantial portion of their profits. Since the April plane collision, the only U.S. port call allowed by Beijing was in July by two small anti-mine ships.

Hong Kong has long been a favored port of call for the U.S. military but Beijing's approval has been required since July 1, 1997, when Britain handed this

former colony back to China.

The Constellation arrived right after it staged an unusually large-scale exercise with another carrier, the USS Carl Vinson, in the South China Sea on Friday.

The maneuver stirred a controversy here as one defense analyst said it was intended to warn Beijing that Washington is keeping close watch on the Taiwan Strait.

The commander of the naval battle group that includes the Constellation, Adm. Terrance Etnyre, sought to play down the significance, saying the naval maneuvers had been planned far ahead of time.

"I'm not sure that there's a big diplomatic message drama," Etnyre responded to questions from reporters on a press tour of the ship. "I'm a sailor, so you'll have to leave the diplomatic messages to the American consulate and the ambassador here in China."

Some of the 6,500 sailors on board the Constellation and six other ships came on shore in the afternoon. The port call ends Saturday.

Petty officers Josh Tomlin, 19, of Jackson, Tenn., and Richard See, 23, of San Diego, Calif., were among a group of

six servicemen heading straight to Beer Castle bar.

"I've been to everywhere else here," See said. "I want to do something, go to different bars and meet different people."

Shopping for silk and electronics on the agenda for Tomlin.

That was great news for merchants at the Fleet Arcade, a waterfront mall that caters to the military.

Roger Sabnani, who runs Sabnani East Ltd. gift shop in the Fleet Arcade, said his business will likely increase fourfold or fivefold while the port call is here.

Sabnani, however, said he was not happy about Beijing's decision to turn down the Navy plane last week. "Maybe we'll have a problem again," he said.

Many of the sailors avoided politics or said they were unaware of the spy plane being barred.

Travis Clark, 21, from Shreveport, La., was happy to talk about his hometown.

"Not many people at home can afford a nice place like Hong Kong," said Clark. He plans to go to (see) music, sightseeing and shopping for souvenirs."

Thousands laid off in Mexico

TIJUANA, Mexico (AP) — Owners of foreign-owned factories who once flocked to the Mexican border to take advantage of its cheap labor are laying off tens of thousands of people in the wake of a U.S. slowdown.

After years of strong economic growth and a booming job market spurred by the North American Free Trade Agreement, Mexico's dynamic

industrial region is sputtering.

On a scruffy hill dotted with shacks, 50-year-old Jose Luis Cuadras struggles to eke out a living after losing his job sewing U.S. baseball hats at a maquiladora, one of the thousands of assembly plants that have characterized Mexico's border with the United States.

He now works at a stand that sells garage doors discarded

by Californians. Carted across the border, the doors are used by impoverished Tijuana residents as walls for their homes. Cuadras now makes about \$5 a day, about half of what he earned at the maquiladora. The lanky man moved into a garage-door home after not being able to pay his rent on an apartment.

"You do what you can to get by," he said.

The maquiladora industry has lost 100,000 jobs this year, mostly in the 2,100-mile northern border region, officials say.

Since January, California, home to the largest maquiladora industry, has lost 23,100 jobs, said Mexico's Secretary Carlos Abascal. Two states host the largest number of maquiladoras.

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NEWS IN BRIEF

Bus accident kills at least 17 people

BUENOS AIRES (AP) — At least 17 people were killed Tuesday when a bus carrying 40 people with a truck on a high roof caught fire, police said.

The accident took place in the city of San Nicolas de los Arroyos, some 125 miles from Buenos Aires. Police said the bus slammed into the back of the truck.

One of the survivors said the bus driver appeared to fall moments before the crash. The driver was among those killed. Fourteen passengers were hospitalized, officials said.

The bus, carrying 38 passengers, had left the eastern city of Resistencia, 100 miles from Buenos Aires, heading to the Argentine capital.

Concordes plan to fly again soon

PARIS (AP) — The supersonic Concorde, outfitted with tougher tires and armor-plated tanks, is likely to get approved to fly before the end of the month, just over a year after the fleet was grounded following a deadly crash.

Certificates allowing the needle-nosed plane to return to the skies will be restored simultaneously by British and French authorities "probably before the end of August 2001," said a statement issued at a meeting Monday by a group of British and French officials.

Air France and British Airways are the only carriers to have a dozen remaining Concordes.

The statement was suggesting a clear timetable for an eventual return of the jet to the skies. It came after a ninth — and final — meeting of the working group, made up of officials from the two countries' transportation ministries and civil aviation authorities.

Air France grounded its fleet of five Concordes immediately after the July 25, 2000, crash of one of its jets north of Paris, which killed 113 people.

British Airways kept its planes flying until shortly after the entire fleet's airworthiness certificate was withdrawn in August last year.

The official first flight of the jet on Monday is not the working group, made up of officials from the two countries' transportation ministries and civil aviation authorities.

August last year.