

TURMOIL IN MIDEAST
China calls for new forum to defuse crises

AFP, Beijing

China's foreign minister Wang Yi has called for a new forum to defuse tensions in the Middle East after a meeting with his Iranian counterpart where he reiterated Beijing's support for Tehran.

Wang and Javid Zarif also reaffirmed their commitment to Iran's 2015 nuclear deal with world powers, according to the Chinese foreign ministry, an implicit rebuke of the United States for abandoning the accord during their Saturday meeting in China's southwestern Tengchong city.

Iran has been locked in an acrimonious relationship with Saudi Arabia, the other major Middle Eastern power, over the war in Yemen, Iranian influence in Iraq and Saudi support for Washington's sanctions on Tehran.

"China proposes to build a regional multilateral dialogue platform with equal participation of all stakeholders," said the



Chinese foreign ministry statement.

The forum would "enhance mutual understanding through dialogue and explore political and diplomatic solutions to security issues in the Middle East", the statement added.

Wang added that support for the Iranian nuclear deal, negotiated by the Obama administration but ultimately abandoned by Donald Trump, would be a precondition of entry to the forum.

Zarif said on Twitter his "fruitful talks" with Wang amounted to a rejection of "US unilateralism" and had also focused on strategic ties and collaboration on the development of a coronavirus vaccine.



Search and rescue teams work on the blast site hit by a rocket during the fighting over the breakaway region of Nagorno-Karabakh in the city of Ganja, Azerbaijan, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Karabakh truce hope tatters

Intense shelling reported on civilian areas as rivals trade accusations

AFP, Stepanakert

Hopes that a Russian-brokered ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan might hold were further dashed yesterday, with both sides accusing the other of intense shelling on civilian areas and escalating two weeks of fierce clashes.

Azerbaijan's foreign ministry said that overnight shelling by Armenian forces on the country's second largest city, Ganja, had left seven people dead and 33 wounded including children, less than 24 hours after the halt to fighting was supposed to take effect.

Rescuers in red helmets dug through piles of debris with their bare hands in search of signs of survivors, an AFP journalist in the city reported.

They retrieved one nearly naked body and gingerly put it in a white bag to be taken away in an ambulance while several horrified residents watched on and wept.

One witness said they were woken by a huge blast that levelled an entire square block of one- and two-floor houses in the early hours of the morning, leaving nine apartments destroyed.

"Everything I've worked for my

entire life has been destroyed," said resident Zagit Aliyev, 68.

The agreement to pause hostilities in order to exchange prisoners and the bodies of people killed after two weeks of fighting over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region was approved by



Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers in marathon Russia-brokered talks in Moscow.

The truce officially entered into force at noon on Saturday but both sides almost immediately accused each other of violations.

Yesterday, the defence ministry in the breakaway region insisted Armenian forces were respecting the humanitarian ceasefire and in turn accused Azerbaijan of shelling

civilian-populated areas.

New fighting broke out late last month, stemming from a long-simmering disagreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Karabakh.

The disputed territory is an ethnic Armenian enclave in Azerbaijan, home to about 150,000 people, which broke from Azerbaijan's control in a war in the 1990s that killed some 30,000 people.

Its separatist government is strongly backed by Armenia, which like Azerbaijan gained independence with the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union.

The most recent bout of fighting has been the heaviest since the 1990s war, with more than 450 people reported dead, thousands forced to flee their homes. The clashes have also stoked fears of a full-blown war embroiling Turkey, which strongly backs Azerbaijan, and Russia, which has a military treaty with Armenia.

Armenia and world leaders including Russian leader Vladimir Putin and French President Emmanuel Macron have denounced the deployment of pro-Turkish fighters from Syria and Libya to bolster Azerbaijan's army.

'We cannot continue to squeeze it like an orange'

Celebrities lead call to act on climate crisis

AFP, San Francisco

With a call to save the planet, Prince William and Pope Francis on Saturday joined activists, artists, celebrities and politicians in a free streamed TED event aimed at mobilizing and unifying people to confront the climate crisis.

"The shared goals of our generation are clear," William said in a video message kicking off the event, dubbed Countdown.

For more than five hours the second-in-line to the British throne and other speakers dived in the reality of the climate crisis, the need for action, and what can be done.

Solutions posed included ways of farming that welcome wildlife as well as crops; transportation systems powered by electricity; cities designed for people instead of cars; economies that thrive by keeping the planet healthy instead of destroying it, and voting for political leaders keen to end the climate crisis.

"We are living during a historic moment marked by difficult challenges, as we all know," Pope Francis said while urging people of all faiths to unite to protect Mother Earth.

"The world is shaken by the crisis

caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, which highlights yet an even bigger challenge - the socio-environmental crisis."

The Pope joined other speakers in saying the climate crisis is real and backed by science, and needs to be urgently confronted in ways that are socially just.

"The Earth must be worked and nursed, cultivated and protected," the Pope said. "We cannot continue to squeeze it like an orange."

Firms that make fortunes from fossil fuels or other greenhouse gas-emitting operations cause damage they don't pay for, while funneling money to politicians who help preserve the status quo, said another speaker, US economist Rebecca Henderson, who called on businesses to step up.

"We let capitalism turn into something monstrous," she said.

An array of Countdown speakers urged people to use their voting power to elect decision-makers who prioritize stopping the climate crisis.

Countdown organizers set a goal of mobilizing governments and citizens to cut greenhouse gas emissions in half over the next decade and get to net-zero carbon pollution by the year 2050.



An injured demonstrator sits on the ground after being detained by Belarusian law enforcement officers during an opposition rally to reject the presidential election results in Minsk, Belarus, yesterday. Security forces detained dozens of protesters yesterday and used force, including water cannon and batons, to break up crowds demanding a new presidential election, TV footage showed.

PHOTO: REUTERS

INDIA-CHINA BORDER TENSIONS

Dialogue won't work

Says US, warns China has 60,000 troops on LAC

TNN, New Delhi

Indicating that it might be necessary to confront China over its aggressive actions, US national security adviser Robert O'Brien said the time has come to accept that dialogue and agreements will not persuade or compel the communist giant to change its ways and it will no longer do to look the other way.

"The time has come to accept that dialogue and agreements will not persuade or compel the People's Republic of China to change. There's nothing to be gained from looking the other way or turning the other cheek. We've been doing that for far too long," said O'Brien, clearly hinting at the growing exasperation with China and stepped up rhetoric as US elections near.

The US statement comes days before the next round of talks between Indian and Chinese military commanders in Ladakh, scheduled for today.

India and the US will also be holding the next round of '2+2' meeting between foreign and defence ministers on October 26-27 in New Delhi and it is significant that

O'Brien pointed to the massing of Chinese troops on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh.

"Chinese Communist Party's territorial aggression is apparent on its Indian border where China has attempted to seize control of the line of actual control by force."

The comments coincide with the statements of US secretary of state Mike Pompeo, who said on Friday that India was facing a 60,000 troop build-up in eastern Ladakh. Pompeo, who has led the US diplomatic effort against China, was speaking after attending the second Quad ministerial meeting in Tokyo earlier this week.

"The Indians are seeing 60,000 Chinese soldiers on their northern border," Pompeo was quoted as saying after returning from Tokyo, where he met Indian Foreign Minister S Jaishankar, along with counterparts from Japan and Australia.

The Quad meeting was closely watched, being the most important counter-balance to China and its timing in the midst of the border stand off and China's abrasive behaviour with other neighbours too.

NEWS IN BRIEF



20 killed on temple trip in Thailand as bus, train collide

A bus heading to a Buddhist temple collided with a train in central Thailand yesterday, killing at least 20 people dead and injuring 30, authorities said. The accident took place at 8:05 am near the Khlong Kwaeng Klan railway station 63 km east of Bangkok, said Maitree Tritlanon, governor of Chachoengsao province, where the crash occurred. A tour bus carrying some 60 factory workers on their way to a Buddhist ceremony at a temple was crossing a railway track when it was hit by a freight train headed to the capital from the east of the country. Governor Maitree said the crossing has an alarm but does no barrier to block traffic when a train is coming. He said the province will install speed bumps and barriers as well as cut down trees near the crossing to improve visibility.

Mexico asks Pope for apology for church's role in Spanish conquest

Mexico's president has written to Pope Francis to ask for an apology for the Catholic church's role in the oppression of indigenous people in the Spanish conquest 500 years ago. The request was made in a two-page letter that also asked the Vatican to temporarily return several ancient indigenous manuscripts held in its library, ahead of next year's 500-year anniversary of the Spanish conquest of Mexico. The Catholic church played a key role as Spain colonised the Americas and spread its empire, setting up missions to convert indigenous people to Christianity.

Peru president to face graft probe when term ends

Peruvian state prosecutors have said they intend to open a corruption investigation into President Martin Vizcarra when his term ends in July next year. "We have decided that there are reasons to investigate the president of the Republic," said a statement Friday from the prosecutors' office, based on a report from a provincial colleague focusing on public sector corruption. The head of state enjoys immunity from prosecution, meaning the investigation is suspended until he leaves office on July 28, 2021, the statement said. Vizcarra last month survived an impeachment vote in Congress that was launched over the allegations.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

'Ting Mong' the saviour
Cambodian farmers deploy scarecrows to ward off virus

AFP, Kampong Cham

Armed with a stick, a floral-shirted scarecrow with a plastic pot for a head stands guard in front of a rural Cambodian home -- a sentry erected by superstitious farmers to ward off the coronavirus.

Known as "Ting Mong" in Khmer, the creatively rendered scarecrows often pop up in villages that have been hard-hit by infectious diseases like dengue or water-borne diarrhoea.

"It is our ancient superstition to set up Ting Mongs when there are dangerous diseases or to avert evil," said farmer Sok Chany, 45, who has set up her own protector to ward off evil.

The majority-Buddhist kingdom has a strong strain of animism incorporated into the daily lives and rituals of Cambodians, with many believing that spirits are tied to places, animals and things.

Farmer Ton Pheang, dressed his Ting Mong in a bright pink shirt and has a helmet for its head. And he claims it has guarded his family and the village well.

"We've been fine since the outbreak," Ton Pheang tells AFP. Cambodia appears to have escaped the brunt of the pandemic, registering just 283 infections and no deaths -- though sceptics say the low toll could be due to a lack of testing.

Kim sends signal with new huge ICBM

AFP, Seoul

The gargantuan new missile North Korea put on show at a military parade is an explicit threat to US defences and an implicit challenge to both the current and next American president, analysts say, warning Pyongyang could test the weapon next year.

Leader Kim Jong Un watched the intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) roll through Kim Il Sung square -- named after his grandfather -- in Pyongyang at the climax of an unprecedented night-time parade on Saturday.

Analysts concurred that it was the largest road-mobile, liquid-fuelled missile anywhere in the world, and was highly likely to be designed to carry multiple warheads in independent re-entry vehicles (MIRVs). The missile was estimated at 24 metres long and 2.5 metres in diameter.

Jeffrey Lewis of the Middlebury Institute of International Studies said it was "clearly aimed at overwhelming the US missile defense system in Alaska."

If the ICBM carried three or four warheads, he added on Twitter, the US would need

to spend around \$1 billion on 12-16 interceptors to defend against each missile.

"At that cost, I am pretty sure North Korea can add warheads faster than we can add interceptors."

Shortly before being inaugurated in 2017, Donald Trump tweeted that North



Korea developing a weapon capable of reaching parts of the US "won't happen!"

Trump has threatened and made extraordinary moves to meet Kim for a denuclearization deal. But negotiations have been deadlocked since the collapse of their Hanoi summit early last year over sanctions relief and what the North would be willing to give up in return.

The ICBM was proof that the North had