



A man wearing a Santa Claus costume sanitizes children's hands inside a slum, amidst the spread of the coronavirus disease, in Mumbai, India, yesterday. India exceeded 10 million infections of the new coronavirus yesterday, much later than predicted, as the pace of infections slows, despite many in the country giving up on masks and social distancing.

PHOTO: REUTERS

China offers to work with Biden

Urges dialogue to solve disputes, warns of new 'McCarthyism'

AFP, Washington

China's top diplomat on Friday offered cooperation on key priorities of President-elect Joe Biden, warning that Beijing's many US critics were creating an atmosphere of "McCarthyism" and ignoring common interests.

Taking aim at the hawkish approach of President Donald Trump, Foreign Minister Wang Yi voiced hope for a return of talks and "mutual trust" between the world's two largest economic powers after Biden takes over on January 20.

"It is important that US policy toward China return to objectivity and sensibility as early as possible," Wang said in a virtual address to the New York-based Asia Society.

Wang said that China saw "space for cooperation" with Biden on three of the four issues he has identified as immediate priorities – Covid-19, economic recovery and climate change. Biden's fourth stated priority is racial equity.

On the pandemic, Wang said Beijing



and Washington could collaborate in manufacturing vaccines and assisting third countries.

"We hope that we will expand cooperation and manage differences through dialogue," Wang said.

The Trump administration says that decades of US engagement have failed with China, accusing Beijing of rampantly stealing intellectual property, widespread espionage and coercion of other nations through its blitz of infrastructure projects.

In recent months, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has terminated Chinese-funded exchange programs for Americans and tightened visa rules for

Chinese students as well as members of the Communist Party and their families, likely affecting hundreds of millions of people.

"We see McCarthyism resurging and jeopardizing normal international exchanges," Wang said, referring to the witch hunt for communists purported to be in the US government led by Republican senator Joe McCarthy following World War II.

Wang accused unnamed senior US officials of "irresponsible presumption of guilt and emotional lashing-out."

"They ignore the vast common interests and room for cooperation between the two countries and insist that China is a main threat," Wang said.

Biden, who invested significant time in diplomacy with China as vice president, has broadly agreed that Beijing poses a global challenge.

But he is expected to take a less bellicose tone than Trump, with his nominee for secretary of state, Antony Blinken, speaking of potential cooperation on climate change and the pandemic.

India preparing for 'surgical strike' inside Pakistan

Alleges Islamabad, seeks int'l community's help

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

Pakistan's government has alleged that India is preparing to launch a "surgical [military] strike" on Pakistani soil and has called for the international community to help de-escalate the situation between the nuclear-armed neighbours.

Speaking to the press in the United Arab Emirates capital Abu Dhabi on Friday, Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi warned that Pakistan would retaliate if attacked.

"I have learned through our intelligence sources and they have picked up this information that India is planning a surgical strike against Pakistan," said Qureshi.

"This is a serious development and I also have knowledge that they have tried to seek tacit approval from important players who they consider to be their partners."

The two countries have fought three full-scale wars since gaining independence from the British in 1947, with tensions remaining high in the relationship in the

intervening periods.

Both have been on a high state of military alert since a standoff in February 2019 that saw India bomb territory just inside Pakistan's borders and Pakistan shoot down an Indian fighter jet. Pakistan later returned the pilot of the downed fighter aircraft, helping to reduce the immediate tensions.

Qureshi warned that Pakistan would strike back at India "a notch above" if attacked. "I want to tell India very clearly that Pakistan is fully prepared to respond and to defeat their designs," he said.

Pakistan's national security adviser Moeed Yusuf said Pakistan had obtained "very specific and reliable intelligence" of the Indian plans to launch strikes.

"We remind the world that peace is a collective responsibility. The world must prevent India from destabilising the region in its attempt to divert attention from its domestic troubles," said Yusuf.

The two countries frequently accuse each other of sponsoring armed groups or planning attacks against the other.



Pompeo says Russia behind US cyberattack

AFP, Washington

Russia was "pretty clearly" behind a devastating cyberattack on several US government agencies that also hit targets worldwide, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said.

Microsoft said late Thursday that it had notified more than 40 customers hit by the malware, which security experts say could allow attackers unfettered network access to key government systems and electric power grids and other utilities.

"There was a significant effort to use a piece of third-party software to essentially embed code inside of US government systems," Pompeo told The Mark Levin Show on Friday.

"This was a very significant effort, and I think it's the case that now we can say pretty clearly that it was the Russians that engaged in this activity."

Roughly 80 percent of the affected customers are located in the United States, Microsoft president Brad Smith said in a blog post, with victims also found in Belgium, Britain, Canada, Israel, Mexico, Spain and the United Arab Emirates.

James Lewis, vice president at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said the attack may end up being the worst to hit the United States, eclipsing the 2014 hack of US government personnel records in a suspected Chinese infiltration.

Russia has denied involvement.

'Willing to work for the party as all of you desire'

Rahul Gandhi's comment sparks speculation that he may return as Congress president

NDTV ONLINE

Rahul Gandhi said he is "ready to work for the party as all desire" at a meeting yesterday with Congress "dissidents" who had written a letter criticizing the leadership and calling for an overhaul earlier this year. The comment, greeted by applause from all present, including the rebels, has reinforced talk about the 50-year-old returning as Congress president as the party prepares to elect a chief in the New Year.

The five-hour meeting between Sonia Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi Vadra and the so-called "rebels" on the lawns of the Congress interim president's 10 Janpath home marked the first move towards reconciliation after months of feuding, revolt and resignations.

Rahul Gandhi said, "I am willing to work for the party as all of you desire," senior Congress leader Pawan Bansal said after the meeting. The former Congress president reportedly also agreed that "better communication" was needed and

the party needed to strengthen itself at the booth-level.

But sources say Rahul did not mince his words as he addressed veterans like Kamal Nath, who lost power in Madhya Pradesh after senior leader Jyotiraditya Scindia rebelled and switched to the BJP.

Asked whether Gandhi's comment and the cheers that greeted it meant his return as chief, Bansal said: "No one has an issue with Rahul Gandhi... don't put words in my mouth. The process of electing a congress president is in the process."

The dissidents reportedly remained firm on their position of demanding an election for the post of Congress president, the Congress Working Committee and the parliamentary board.

Rahul Gandhi quit as Congress president after the party's national election defeat last year, forcing Sonia Gandhi to take over as interim chief until the party elected a new chief. Since then, he has given no indication of any change of heart.



US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi receives the Pfizer-BioNTech Covid-19 vaccine at the Capitol in Washington, US, on Friday. Earlier, US Vice President Mike Pence received the vaccine live on television in a public display designed to boost national confidence in the drug.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Chilean president handed \$3,500 fine for mask-less selfie

REUTERS, Santiago

Chilean President Sebastian Pinera was slapped with a \$3,500 fine on Friday after posing for a selfie on the beach with a bystander without wearing a mask as required during the coronavirus pandemic, health authorities said.

Chile has strict rules on mask wearing in all public places and violations are punishable with sanctions that include fines and even jail terms.

Pinera apologized then turned himself in shortly after the selfie surfaced on social media in early December.

The president explained he had been walking alone along the beach near his home in the posh Chilean seaside town of Cachoagua when a woman recognized him and asked for a photo together.

The selfie shows the president and the woman standing very near to one another on a sunny day, neither wearing masks.

The gaffe-prone Pinera was previously photographed at a pizza party on the



night protests over inequality broke out in Santiago last year. He was later seen posing for pictures at the square that had been the hub of the demonstrations after the pandemic forced protesters to stay at home.

The virus peaked in Chile in May and June, during the southern hemisphere winter, then subsided through November. Cases are on the rise again, however, prompting new restrictions and quarantines.

Chile has reported 581,135 cases of the virus since the outbreak began in March, and 16,051 deaths from the disease.

FARMERS PROTEST IN INDIA

At least 25 died in 3 weeks: police

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

At least 25 people have died, several of them due to the biting cold weather, during the three-week protest by farmers on the Indian capital's borders, police said.

Tens of thousands of farmers, largely from Punjab and Haryana, have been parked on various highways on New Delhi's borders since the end of November demanding the rollback of the new laws aimed at loosening rules on the pricing, storage and marketing of crops.

Manoj Yadav, director-general of police in the northern Haryana state, told Al Jazeera at least 25 farmers have died since November 26 when tens of thousands of farmers began demonstrations against three farm laws passed by the government in September.

However, farmer leader Darshan Pal told Al Jazeera the "number of dead could be as high as 35".

Farmers fear private companies would eventually dictate terms and the government would stop buying grains like wheat and rice from them at a minimum guaranteed price.

Modi on Friday defended the laws and invited the protesting farmers for more talks, despite several negotiations failing to break the standoff. After a series of previous meetings with Modi's ministers, the protesters have said that nothing short of an official annulment of the three laws will be enough to change their position.

'You'll be left all alone'

Amit Shah warns Mamata as several TMC leaders join BJP ahead of state assembly polls

NDTV ONLINE

Indian Home Minister Amit Shah welcomed high-profile Trinamool Congress rebel Suwendu Adhikari and several others to the BJP yesterday at a mega rally in West Bengal's Paschim Medinipur, sparing no shot at Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee.

"Why are so many people leaving Trinamool Congress? Because of the misrule, corruption and nepotism of Mamata Banerjee. Didi, this is just the beginning. By the time elections come, you will be left all alone," he said.

Besides Adhikari, nine other MLAs from various parties and Trinamool MP Sunil Mondal joined the BJP in Shah's presence. The former BJP chief reiterated that the party would form the next government in the state with more than 200 seats. West Bengal has a 294-member assembly.

"You gave the Congress three decades, didn't you? You gave communists 27 years, didn't you? You gave Trinamool a decade, didn't you? Now give the BJP only five years and see the difference," he told the rally.

Earlier, he cited the examples of freedom fighters like Khudiram Bose and Ramprasad Bismil to tell political rivals not to indulge in regionalism, referring to such tactics as "shallow politics" that ought to be shunned.

"Those who indulge in petty politics in Bengal, I have come to tell them that Khudiram belongs as much to India as he belongs to Bengal," Shah who visited the native village of the Freedom fighter in Paschim Medinipur district, said.

His comments were likely aimed at Trinamool's attempts to paint the BJP as a party of "outsiders" which should not be given any space in West Bengal.

Today, Amit Shah will visit Viswa Bharati University in Bolpur, where he will hold a roadshow.

Shah's West Bengal visit comes nine days after a convoy of BJP chief JP Nadda was attacked by alleged Trinamool workers, sparking a huge row between the Centre and the

state.

Earlier, the state BJP chief, Dilip Ghosh, had said that Shah and Nadda would visit the state every month till the assembly elections, likely in April-May.

The BJP has been investing unprecedented amounts of time and resources in the state ahead of the polls, looking to replace the Mamata Banerjee-led Trinamool Congress from power. Ahead of Mr Shah's visit, the party had assigned parts of West Bengal to six Union Ministers to prep for the polls. These ministers have been tasked with taking charge of campaigning in various Lok Sabha seats.

