

SECOND US DEMOCRATS DEBATE

Front-runner Biden fights back attacks

Democratic presidential front-runner Joe Biden came under heavy fire over healthcare, immigration and criminal justice reform on Wednesday, but fought back against a stage full of rivals eager to knock him off his perch during a contentious debate.

On the second of back-to-back nights of debates among Democrats vying to challenge Republican President Donald Trump in 2020, the former vice president came prepared to do battle after facing criticism for his sometimes wobbly performance in the first debate in Miami last month.

Striking a sharper and more aggressive tone, he tangled with rival Kamala Harris over healthcare, taking up a growing fight that has split the Democratic Party and dominated the first candidate encounter in Detroit on Tuesday.

He ridiculed Harris' contention that the US senator's recently unveiled healthcare plan would not require a middle-class tax increase or the elimination of private insurance plans.

In an exchange with Julian Castro, the former housing secretary under Obama, Biden criticized Castro's plan to decriminalize illegal border crossings.

"If you cross the border illegally, you should be able to be sent back. It's a crime," said Biden.

The debates come about six months before Iowa holds the first nominating contest, and the two nights in Detroit could be the last chance for many of the lower-tier contenders to make an appearance on the national debate stage.

The Democratic National Committee will double its fundraising and polling requirements to qualify for the next debates in September and October, leaving out more candidates and raising questions about their ability to continue their campaigns. So far, only about a third of the field has met the qualifications.



ASEAN-U.S. Ministerial Meeting

1 August 2019, Bangkok, Thailand



US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (5th L) poses for a family photo with foreign ministers from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) during the Asean US Ministerial Meeting in Bangkok, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

SOUTH CHINA SEA ROW

Asean, China negotiations cross key milestone

THE STRAITS TIMES/ANN

Attempts to reduce tension in the contested South China Sea reached a milestone on Wednesday when Beijing revealed that Asean and China had completed the first reading of the single draft negotiating text for a code of conduct (COC).

"This represents a new and important progress in the COC consultations and marks a critical step towards the goal of completing the consultations within three years' time," China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi told his counterparts from Asean, who have gathered this week in Bangkok for the bloc's annual foreign ministers' meeting and related dialogues with partners like China.

Based on this common text - which has so far been kept under wraps - the countries now expected to further narrow down differences in positions.

In a press conference later on Wednesday, Wang expressed support for Asean's recently drafted vision of the Indo-Pacific region - a non-binding document issued in June to articulate Asean's own perspective on

regional cooperation amid the big-power rivalry in its backyard.

It emphasises an inclusive and "rules-based framework" to "help to generate momentum for building strategic trust and win-win cooperation in the region".

Wang told reporters: "Many of the principles and ideas that are contained in this (Asean) outlook are consistent with China's views - for example, a commitment to Asean centrality, staying open, inclusive and transparent." He said Beijing was ready to work closely with Asean to "actively guide and promote our cooperation" for growth.

China claims almost the entire South China Sea, a strategic waterway which is also claimed in parts by Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei, as well as Taiwan.

Beijing has resisted subjecting its territorial claims to international tribunals and instead reclaimed and installed military facilities on disputed islands. It chafes at the US navy's "freedom of navigation" naval operations in these waters, which it regards as external interference.

Not asking Asia to take sides

Pompeo tells Asean nations in Bangkok a day after China urged US to avoid sowing 'distrust' among 'neighbours'

AFP, Bangkok

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo yesterday insisted that Washington was not asking Southeast Asian nations to "choose" between his country and rival power China, as he trailed a rebooted security and trade strategy at a Bangkok summit.

The denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula, a bitter trade war between the superpowers and open access to contested seas dominated talks between Pompeo and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi on the sidelines of a summit of Southeast Asia's top diplomats.

Pompeo is in Bangkok tasked with reassuring Asian allies that the US remains a key player in the region, as China builds up its military presence in disputed seas and airspace and cements its economic and political primacy across the region.

The rivalry between the two superpowers is framed by a trade war that has cramped global growth

and seeded uncertainty across Asia's economies.

Pompeo and Wang shook hands and smiled before the brief talks.

Both later played down the rifts between their nations, with Wang describing the meeting as a "deep communication" that "has helped to increase our mutual understanding".

In a tweet Pompeo said he had "an in-depth exchange of views" with Wang -- including on North Korea -- adding "when it advances US interests, we are ready to cooperate with China."

Pompeo also insisted the US was not prodding Southeast Asian nations to "choose between countries".

"Our engagement in this region has not been and will not be a zero-sum exercise," he said in short remarks at the opening of a meeting with the 10-member Asean states.

On Wednesday Wang described Southeast Asia as China's

"neighbourhood" and in a barely concealed swipe at the US urged "non-regional countries" to not "sow distrust" in the area.

Meanwhile, South Korea yesterday warned Japan that it would be forced to review security cooperation between the two key US allies if Tokyo pushes ahead with plans to remove Seoul from its "white list" of trusted trade partners.

The squabble between the East Asian neighbour follows a decades-long quarrel over Japanese forced labour during World War II.

Japan last month unveiled tough restrictions on exports of chemicals vital to Seoul's world-leading chip and smartphone industry.

Tokyo has also said it will remove South Korea from its preferential trade status as early as Friday (today), a move that could affect hundreds of key items imported to the South and punch a hole in its economy.



UK to spend extra \$2.6b on no-deal Brexit planning

REUTERS, London

Britain said it is ramping up preparations for a no-deal Brexit by spending an extra 2.1 billion pounds (\$2.6 billion) to stockpile medicines, hire more border officials and fund one of the biggest peacetime advertising campaigns.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who took power last week, has pledged to leave the European Union without transitional arrangements in three months' time unless the EU agrees to renegotiate the deal reached by his predecessor Theresa May.

In his first major policy announcement, new finance minister Sajid Javid said the outlay would allow the government to increase training for customs officials, hire more staff to deal with an expected increase in passport applications, and improve infrastructure around ports. Javid said UK's economy was strong enough to cope with a no-deal Brexit and rejected criticism that the money would be better spent on healthcare or education.

"A lot of the work was going on but (what) we needed to do was turbo charge it to make sure we are properly genuinely ready," he said.

The Labour party branded the spending an "appalling waste of taxpayers' cash" because the majority of lawmakers in parliament had made clear their intention to block an exit without a withdrawal agreement.

WAR IN YEMEN

Rebel, jihadists attacks kill 49

AFP, Aden

Separate attacks by Shia rebels and a jihadist suicide bomber killed at least 49 people in Yemen's government-held second city Aden yesterday, many of them newly trained police cadets.

The attacks were the first to hit the southern port city in more than a year and dealt a heavy blow to the government's reorganised security forces, which have been trained and equipped by the United Arab Emirates.

The first attack was a suicide car bombing carried out by jihadists on a police station, a security source said. 10 people were killed and 16 were injured.

The second attack was carried out by the Iran-aligned Huthi rebels, who said they launched a drone and a ballistic missile at a training camp west of Aden.

The aerial attack hit as senior commanders were overseeing a passing out parade for newly graduated cadets at Al-Jala Camp, 20 kilometres (13 miles) from the centre of Aden.

Between 30 and 35 people were killed or wounded, most of them new graduates of the so-called Security Belt force.



Soldiers lie on the ground after a missile attack on a military parade during a graduation ceremony for newly recruited troopers in Aden, Yemen, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Rwanda shuts border with Ebola-hit DR Congo

Rwanda has shut its frontier with Ebola-hit Democratic Republic of Congo after a third case of the deadly virus was detected in the border city of Goma, the Congolese presidency said yesterday. In a statement, it said there had been a "unilateral decision by the Rwandan authorities" that affected citizens from both countries who had to cross the border as part of their daily life. Goma, a city of two million people and a major transport hub, shares the border with the Rwandan city of Gisenyi, which has a population of more than 85,000. Cross-frontier links are intense. Many people have jobs on the other side of the border while others have homes or put their children in schools in the neighbouring city.

Shooting kills Palestinian, wounds 3 Israeli soldiers

A Palestinian crossed into Israel from Gaza and shot at troops, setting off a firefight in which he was killed and three Israeli soldiers were wounded early yesterday, the army said. An Israeli tank targeted a Hamas military post after the incident which began at around 2:00 am, Israel's military said. It said an army officer was moderately wounded and two soldiers were lightly injured by gunfire from the Palestinian, who entered Israel from the border fence in the Khan Yunis area of the southern Gaza Strip. Israel's military believes he was a member of the Islamist movement Hamas but had acted alone. He was armed with a Kalashnikov rifle and grenades, it added. He threw at least one grenade and was killed by Israeli soldiers who were scrambled to the area in response.

Average life expectancy in Japan hits record high



The average life expectancy of Japanese people reached record highs of 87.32 years for women and 81.25 for men in 2018, an increase of about five years for both sexes over the course of the 30 years, according to the health ministry. The average lifespan of women inched up 0.05 years from the previous year, posting a record high for the sixth consecutive year. Meanwhile, the figure for men increased by 0.16 years from 2017, topping the record for the seventh consecutive year, the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry said. Looking at the latest overseas statistics by country and region, Japanese women ranked second, and men the third — the same as the previous year. Hong Kong topped the global ranking for both females and males at 87.56 and 82.17 respectively.

SOURCE: AFP, THE YOMIURI SHIMBUN/ANN

CONTROVERSIAL DENGUE VACCINATION PROGRAMME

Philippines may use Dengvaxia again

PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER/ANN

Philippines is still open to allowing the use of the dengue vaccine again if experts agree to recommend it to combat the rising number of cases of the mosquito-borne disease in the country, according to presidential spokesperson Salvador Panelo.

"That has to be discussed thoroughly and extensively. We need experts to support any call for the return of Dengvaxia," Panelo said in response to a proposal by Iloilo Rep. Janette Garin, a former health secretary, to make the vaccine available anew to the public.

He noted, however, that health experts were divided over the benefits of the vaccine.

The Department of Health (DOH) stopped its massive dengue immunization program using Dengvaxia in late 2017 after its manufacturer, the French pharmaceutical giant Sanofi Pasteur, said patients who had no prior exposure to the dengue virus could suffer severe symptoms.

More than 800,000 public school children had already been inoculated under the P3.5-billion immunization program, which began during the Aquino administration, by the time it was halted. Sanofi later reimbursed P1.16 billion to the

government for the unused vaccines.

The aborted mass vaccination triggered congressional inquiries and lawsuits, including graft charges against former president Benigno Aquino III, Garin and former Budget Secretary Florencio Abad, among other people.

The Public Attorney's Office also filed homicide complaints against health



officials for the deaths of dozens of children allegedly caused by Dengvaxia. But in January 2019, the DOH said no death had been confirmed to have been directly caused by the vaccine.

Garin told reporters on Wednesday that the country would not be suffering from the current dengue outbreak if the government had not discontinued its immunization

program using Dengvaxia.

The vaccination program, she said, was intended to reduce hospitalization by 80 percent and bring down the severity of the disease by 93 percent. Some people will still suffer from dengue but, like in Brazil, the cases will be mild, she added.

She noted that Dengvaxia was recently included in WHO's biennial list of "essential medicines."

Philippines has declared a national alert on July 15 due to the nationwide spike in the number of dengue cases.

The DOH's Epidemiology Bureau reported 8,295 dengue cases in just a week (July 7-13), 53 percent more than the figure for the same period last year.

As of July 13, there had already been more than 130,000 reported dengue cases nationwide, with 561 deaths, or almost double that last year's. Close to 30,000 cases were children aged 5 to 9.

Health Undersecretary Rolando Enrique Domingo on Wednesday said all the DOH regional directors would meet in Manila on Friday to determine what other measures could be taken to stop the surge of dengue cases.

FACEBOOK-BACKED RESEARCH Progress made linking brains and machines

AFP, San Francisco

Facebook-backed researchers have managed to translate brain signals into spoken words, bringing the social network's vision of linking brains and machines closer to reality.

A study published this week by University of California-San Francisco scientists showed progress toward a new type of brain-computer interface. The project involved brain implants, but could be a step toward accomplishing the goal with a non-invasive method such as augmented reality glasses with sensors.

"A decade from now, the ability to type directly from our brains may be accepted as a given," Facebook said Tuesday in an online post updating a project announced two years ago.

Such a breakthrough could benefit people with paralysis, spinal cord injuries, neurodegenerative diseases or other conditions making them unable to speak, and may also let people control technology such as augmented reality glasses just by thinking, Facebook said.

The study was funded by Facebook Reality Labs, a research unit at the California-based internet titan focused on technology for augmented and virtual reality experiences.