

TURMOIL IN CONGRESS IN INDIA

Loyalists promoted, dissenters snubbed

NDTV ONLINE

Days after saying she had no ill-will against 23 Congress veterans who wrote her a letter that lured the party into turmoil, Sonia Gandhi has taken the first steps to keep the so-called dissidents in check.

Jairam Ramesh, a senior leader who was not in the dissenting group, has been appointed chief whip of the Congress.

Gandhi has also formed a committee in the Rajya Sabha with Congress party's treasurer and her political advisor Ahmed Patel and another loyalist KC Venugopal to deal with issues that may come up in the Rajya Sabha.

This new committee will effectively side-line and keep under check the Leader of Opposition Ghulam Nabi Azad and Deputy Leader Anand Sharma, sources said. Both the leaders had played a critical role in writing the letter and were instrumental in ensuring not many Rajya Sabha leaders come out in support of Sonia Gandhi.

To show this is not being done exclusively to side-line the dissenters, Sonia Gandhi has appointed a similar committee in the Lok Sabha, with Gaurav Gogoi as the Deputy Leader and Ravneet Singh Bittu as a whip. Both leaders are believed to be close supporters of the Gandhi family.



Sonia Gandhi has also ensured other letter-writers like Manish Tewari and Shashi Tharoor in the Lok Sabha are ignored, sources said. Both Tiwari and Tharoor are excellent orators and have lost out because of being signatories, they added.

With this decision, the days of leaders like Ghulam Nabi Azad and Anand Sharma appear to be numbered as the leaders of the Congress party in the Rajya Sabha but top aides say Sonia Gandhi will wait for the monsoon season to end before ordering a change.

At a stormy meeting on Monday, the group of Congress veterans had found themselves targeted for sending the letter calling for sweeping reforms, fair internal elections and a "full-time, visible leadership" that they sent to Sonia Gandhi, who took over as interim chief after her son Rahul Gandhi's resignation last year.

But after sharp attacks, accusations and sparring, the meeting ended on a conciliatory note with Sonia Gandhi saying all was forgiven. The party endorsed the Gandhi leadership. Sonia Gandhi would continue as interim Congress chief until an All India Congress Committee (AICC) meeting to be called in six months, the party said. The Congress also decided to set up a committee to examine the grievances in the letter.



US President Donald Trump grabs one of his grandchildren as he, US first lady Melania Trump and their extended family watch Trump campaign fireworks explode behind the Washington Monument from the South Lawn of the White House after his acceptance speech as the 2020 Republican presidential nominee during the final event of the Republican National Convention in Washington on Thursday night.

PHOTO: REUTERS

WHO vaccine plan in chaos as govts go it alone

REUTERS, Geneva

The World Health Organization will next week receive a raft of pledges of support for its plan for Covid-19 vaccines for all.

But the agency has already had to scale back its ambition.

The United States, Japan, Britain and the European Union have struck their own deals to secure millions of Covid-19 vaccine doses for their citizens, ignoring the UN body's warnings that "vaccine nationalism" will squeeze supplies.

If other countries that can afford it pursue a similar approach, the WHO's strategy for fighting the coronavirus pandemic globally and equitably risks coming undone, experts warn.

"If that were to happen, it's fairly clear that there would be insufficient volumes of vaccine available for any other countries, particularly in the first six to nine months," said Alex Harris, head of global policy at the Wellcome Trust health charity.

Countries wishing to be part of the WHO initiative, dubbed COVAX, must submit expressions of interest by Monday.

More than 170 countries, including Canada, Norway, South Korea and Britain, have submitted non-binding expressions of interest to participate in the scheme, which the WHO has touted as the only global initiative to ensure COVID-19 vaccines are available worldwide to rich and poor countries alike.

It has signed up nine COVID-19 vaccine candidates and set out plans to obtain and deliver 2 billion doses by the end of 2021 across countries that sign up.

But it has struggled to get wealthier countries on board in full beyond pledges of funding and warm words about donating surplus vaccines.

China 'destabilising' Pacific

Says pentagon chief a day after vowing not to 'cede an inch'; Beijing says US risking soldiers' lives as military tensions boil

AGENCIES

US Defense Secretary Mark Esper yesterday accused China of "destabilising" the Pacific region on a whistle-stop trip to the tiny island nation of Palau as military tensions grow between the world's two largest economies.

The visit, which lasted barely three hours, comes as Washington attempts to counter Beijing's efforts to gain influence in the sparsely populated but strategically important Pacific island nations.

Esper said the United States and Palau shared values of freedom "where all countries respect the rules and norms for peace and prosperity of all nations".

"This is especially important today, as we continue work alongside our allies and partners to protect that international system that is under threat from China and its ongoing destabilising activities in the region,"



he said.

War of words raged between the superpowers on Thursday when Esper vowed not to "cede an inch" in the Pacific and China replied by warning Washington that it was risking soldiers' lives.

Both are at loggerheads over issues from technology and human rights to Chinese military activities in the disputed South China Sea, with each accusing the other of deliberately provocative behavior.

In the latest US move against China ahead of November's presidential election, Washington on Wednesday

blacklisted 24 Chinese companies and targeted individuals over construction and military actions in the busy South China Sea waterway.

On Thursday, a US Navy warship carried out a routine operation near the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea, something frequently criticized by Beijing as threatening its sovereignty.

Esper said the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) wanted Beijing to project power globally via its military.

"We're not going to cede this region, an inch of ground if you will, to another country, any other country."

In Beijing, China's Defense Ministry shot back at "certain US politicians" it said were damaging Sino-US military ties in the run-up to the November election for their own selfish gain, even seeking to create military clashes.

"This kind of behavior puts the lives of frontline officers and soldiers on both sides at risk," it said.

WHO to review alert rules after criticism

Says Covid contacts should be tested, regardless of symptoms

AENGCIIS

The WHO said Thursday it was setting up a committee to consider changing the rules on declaring an international health emergency, following criticism of its Covid-19 pandemic response.

The World Health Organization declared a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC) over the new coronavirus on January 30 -- at which time the respiratory disease had infected fewer than 100 people outside China, and claimed no lives beyond its borders.

But under the current International Health Regulations (IHR) governing preparedness and response for health emergencies, there are no lower, intermediate levels of alarm beneath a full PHEIC, either on a global or regional scale.

The WHO has faced accusations -- notably from Washington -- of mishandling the pandemic, and waiting too long to sound the alarm, reports AFP.

WHO experts had met on January 22 and 23, but at that point did not conclude that the outbreak merited the high state of alert of a full PHEIC.

WHO chief Adhanom Ghebreyesus told a virtual press conference on Thursday that the Covid-19 pandemic had been an "acid test" for countries as well as for the IHR. Now the WHO will set up a review committee into the global regulations to see whether any changes should be made, Tedros said.

The world health body reiterated its advice on Thursday that resources permitting, people exposed to coronavirus should be tested even if they do not show immediate symptoms of infection, reports Reuters.

The comments come after the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said this week that people exposed to Covid-19 but not symptomatic may not need to be tested, surprising doctors and politicians and prompting accusations the guidance was politically motivated.

Maria Van Kerkhove, a WHO epidemiologist, said the UN agency recommended suspected cases and their contacts be tested, if possible, but the focus should be on people displaying signs of infection.



This aerial view shows damage to a neighborhood by Hurricane Laura outside of Lake Charles, Louisiana, on Thursday. At least six people were killed by the hurricane in Louisiana, but the governor said Thursday that the most powerful storm to make landfall in the US state in living memory did not cause the "catastrophic" damage that had been feared.

PHOTO: AFP

Gaza flare-up shows no let-up

AFP, Gaza City

Israeli tanks and warplanes bombed Hamas positions in Gaza yesterday and the Islamists retaliated with rockets as a three-week-old flare-up showed no let-up despite international mediation efforts.

Warning sirens sounded before dawn in Israeli communities near the border as the pre-dawn air strikes and shelling prompted Hamas to launch a salvo of six rockets in retaliation.

The Palestinian Islamist group, which has controlled Gaza since 2007, said the rockets were a "direct response to the escalation by the Israeli occupier".

Israel launched a new wave of strikes in reprisal, targeting "additional Hamas military targets" in Gaza, including a "weapons manufacturing site", the military said.

Israel has bombed Gaza almost daily since August 6, in response to the airborne incendiary devices and, less frequently, rockets launched across the border.

In response, Israel has been to tighten a blockade on Gaza. It has banned Gaza fishermen from going to sea and closed its goods crossing with the territory, prompting the closure of Gaza's sole power plant for want of fuel.

Floods kill 23 in Karachi

REUTERS, Karachi

Pakistan's flooded financial capital of Karachi was plunged into chaos yesterday with power cuts, streets under water and cellphone outages caused by heavy rain as authorities said at least 23 people had been killed in downpours the previous day.

Record torrential rainfall flooded major city streets and damaged homes and other buildings on Thursday, with more rain expected.

The provincial government declared a public holiday to avoid residents having to commute on Friday with Chundrigar Road, home to the central bank, stock exchange and head offices of several banks, flooded.

The Chief Minister of Sindh province, Murad Ali Shah, ordered schools be used to accommodate displaced families, whose homes had been damaged or were unreachable.

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