

POST-ELECTION UNITED STATES

Biden focuses on economy as Trump remains defiant

Obama slams GOP for not accepting result

REUTERS, Washington

President-elect Joe Biden yesterday was to focus on reviving a pandemic-battered US economy as he prepares to take office, while outgoing President Donald Trump has promised more lawsuits of the type that so far have failed to alter his election defeat.

With coronavirus cases surging, Biden will receive a briefing and give a speech in his home state of Delaware on rebuilding an economy that has suffered millions of job losses as the pandemic has killed more than 245,000 Americans.

Biden's scientific advisers will meet this week with pharmaceutical companies developing vaccines to prevent Covid-19, a top aide to the president-elect said, in preparation for the logistical challenges of widespread vaccination after the Democrat takes office on Jan. 20.

Trump, a Republican, briefly appeared to acknowledge defeat on Sunday only to backtrack, saying on Twitter that he concedes "nothing" and repeating his unfounded accusations of voter fraud.

He later promised on Twitter to file "big cases showing the unconstitutionality of

the 2020 Election," even though he has made no headway with his legal challenges in multiple states so far.

Election officials from both parties have said there is no evidence of major irregularities.

Biden beat Trump in the Nov 3 election by the same 306-232 margin in the state-by-state Electoral College that Trump proclaimed a "landslide" when he won in 2016. The former vice president also won the national popular vote by at least 5.5 million votes, or 3.6 percentage points, with ballots still being counted.

Former president Barack Obama, a Democrat who campaigned against Trump, said it was past time for Trump to concede, and criticized Republicans who also refuse to accept the victory of his former vice president.

"When your time is up, then it is your job to put the country first and think beyond your own ego," Obama told the CBS News show "60 Minutes" in an interview that aired on Sunday.

"I'm more troubled by the fact that other Republican officials who clearly know better are going along with this."



US President Donald Trump replaces his putter as he plays golf at the Trump National Golf Club in Virginia, US, on Sunday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

UK PM self-isolates again

US reels from virus surge; millions remain under curbs in Europe

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson was in self-isolation yesterday after a contact tested positive for the coronavirus while spiralling infections in the United States saw stay-at-home measures imposed on Chicago, its third-biggest city.

Global infections have soared past 54 million with more than 1.3 million deaths, spurring governments to reimpose unpopular and stifling restrictions on social life, free movement and business.

In hard-hit Europe curbs have been brought back -- often in the face of protests -- from Greece to Britain, where PM and Covid-19 survivor Johnson insisted he was healthy and isolating out of precaution after coming into contact with an MP who later tested positive for the virus.

"It doesn't matter that I'm fit as a butcher's dog, feel great... that I've had the disease and I'm bursting with antibodies," said Johnson, who was hospitalised for the virus in April.

"We've got to interrupt the spread



of the disease," he added, saying he would lead the virus response from Downing Street.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel is pushing for tighter measures, including masks in all schools and smaller class sizes.

Outside work or school, contact between people should also be "restricted to those from another fixed household", under a proposal from Merkel's office due to be put to regional leaders.

Germany began a new round of shutdowns in November, closing restaurants, cultural venues and leisure facilities. But while new cases are plateauing, daily numbers,

officials say, are still too high.

In France, which has been under partial lockdown for more than two weeks, health minister Olivier Veran warned the strict measures had slowed the disease but "we have not won against the virus yet".

Concerns of a resurgence also remain in parts of the world that have largely brought their caseloads under control.

In Hong Kong, the government further tightened restrictions from Monday on the number of people in bars and restaurants, to guard against a spike.

Infections in the United States, the world's worst-hit nation, show no sign of slowing after one million new cases in less than a week pushed the total number past 11 million.

The spikes have prompted new curbs while experts warn families against large gatherings for the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday.

A stay-at-home advisory was to come into force Monday in Chicago, while New York is also rushing to flatten a second curve.

EU eyes tax as tool in climate change fight

REUTERS, Brussels

Taxation will not escape the European Union's plans to curb planet-warming emissions, and levies should be revamped to reflect climate and environmental costs, the head of EU climate policy said yesterday.

Brussels is planning a far-reaching overhaul of policies including Europe's carbon market, farming subsidies and CO2 standards for cars as it seeks to slash EU emissions to 'net zero' - meaning that all emissions must be offset in full by absorption measures - by 2050.

As part of those plans, the European Commission will revise EU energy taxation rules by next summer.

Commission Executive Vice-President Frans Timmermans said the bloc needs to rectify the current system, where taxes reflect the cost of making and transporting a product but fail to account for its toll on the environment.

"At some point, we need to make sure that our carbon footprint is fully reflected in our taxes," Timmermans told the online European Business Summit. "I say this fully knowing that this is very often (the responsibility of) national policy. But if you want to be consistent on this, and you want us to go into a circular economy, you will have to think about changing the tax system."

Some countries have introduced national environmental taxes. The Netherlands will next year impose CO2 taxes on industry and increase ticket taxes on flights to close the gap in affordability between plane and train tickets.

Meanwhile, EU countries have agreed to a bloc-wide tax on non-recycled plastic waste, and the Commission has said it is considering a jet fuel tax to promote a cut in aviation emissions. However, changes to EU taxation rules need approval from all 27 member countries, making them difficult to pass. The EU currently sets minimum excise duty rates for member countries to apply to fuels such as gas and coal.

NEWS IN BRIEF



Syria's FM Muallem dies

Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem, a stalwart of Bashar al-Assad's regime who held his job through a decade of conflict and several reshuffles, died Monday at the age of 79. The veteran diplomat was hit with US and European sanctions early on in the conflict that has torn Syria apart since 2011 and was known for his tirades claiming that the war was the result of a Western plot. Muallem, who had been foreign minister since 2006, started his career in the diplomatic service in 1964. In 2012, he also became deputy prime minister. The government announcement did not specify the cause of his death, but his health was understood to have been deteriorating for some time.

Pakistan's capital blocked off over anti-France protest

Pakistan authorities sealed off a major road into the capital Islamabad for a second day yesterday as a far-right religious party held fresh anti-France protests. A rally in the neighbouring city of Rawalpindi which attracted up to 5,000 people on Sunday spilled over into yesterday, with around a thousand protesters gathered at the roadblock preventing them from entering the capital. Commuters faced lengthy delays on alternative routes into the city. Pakistan has seen small and scattered protests over the past few weeks in response to French President Emmanuel Macron's recent remarks on Islam. The French president spoke out after an extremist beheaded a teacher near Paris after he showed cartoons deemed blasphemous by Muslims during a class on free speech.

Nitish Kumar takes oath as Bihar CM

Nitish Kumar has been sworn-in as the chief minister of Indian state of Bihar for the fourth consecutive term yesterday in the presence of Union Home minister Amit Shah and BJP national president Jagat Prakash Nadda. Janata Dal-United (JDU) leader Nitish Kumar and 14 ministries have sworn-in including Tarkishore Prasad and Renu Devi from the BJP as his two deputies. Opposition leader, Tejashwi Yadav of the Rashtriya Janata Dal decided not to attend the event. The NDA won 125 seats in the 243-member state Assembly, three above the halfway mark. The JDU which is the alliance partner of the NDA in Bihar, has just won only 43 seats in the state's assembly elections and the BJP managed to win 74 seats in the state.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

Marie-Antoinette's silk slipper fetches \$50,000

AFP, Paris

A white shoe made of silk and goat leather that belonged to Marie-Antoinette, France's last queen before the 1789 revolution, sold for 43,750 euros (\$51,780) on Sunday, the auctioneers said.

The 22.5 centimetre-long (8.8-inch), heeled shoe, roughly equivalent to a European size 36, is adorned with four ribbons and in good condition, apart from slight wearing of the silk, the Osenat auction house said.

With international collectors showing strong interest, Osenat said the price quickly rose from the reserve of 8,000 to 10,000 euros (\$9,450 to \$11,800) and was snapped up by an unidentified buyer.

The sale took place in Versailles, the town west of Paris that was once home to

France's royal court and where from her arrival at the age of 15 Marie-Antoinette enjoyed a lavish lifestyle.

In the turmoil of the French Revolution the shoe ended up in the hands of Marie-Emilie Leschevin, a close friend of the queen's head chambermaid.

Her family held on to it for generations before it came to auction 227 years after her death.

Marie-Antoinette -- born an Austrian archduchess -- was the wife of Louis XVI.

"Let them eat cake," she is often said to have responded when told that peasants were starving because there was no bread. The royal couple was executed by guillotine during the Terror in 1793 but France continues to be fascinated by Marie-Antoinette.



Pakistan's 'university of jihad'

AFP, Akora Khattak

Maulana Yousaf Shah cracks a wide smile as he rattles off a list of former students turned Taliban leaders, revelling in their victories over superpowers on Afghanistan's battlefields after graduating from Pakistan's "university of jihad".

The Darul Uloom Haqqania seminary has chummed out a who's who of Taliban top brass -- including many now on the hardline group's negotiating team holding talks with the Kabul government to end a 20-year war.

"Russia was broken into pieces by the students and graduates of Darul Uloom Haqqania and America was also sent packing," beamed Shah, an influential cleric at the seminary that critics have dubbed the "university of jihad".

"We are proud."

The sprawling campus in Pakistan's Akora Khattak, about 60 kilometres east of Peshawar, is home to roughly 4,000 students who are fed, clothed and educated for free.

It has sat at the crossroads of regional militant violence for years, educating many Pakistanis and Afghan refugees -- some of whom returned home to wage war against the Russians and Americans or preach jihad.

Despite its infamy in some quarters,

it has enjoyed state support in Pakistan, where mainstream political parties are heavily boosted by links with religious factions.

This month, Darul Uloom Haqqania's leaders boasted of backing the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan in a video posted online -- outraging the Kabul government, which is battling a surge in violence across the country as the US prepares to withdraw troops.



Seminaries like Haqqania "give birth to radical jihadism, produce Taliban and are threatening our country", Sediq Sediqqi, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's spokesman, told AFP, demanding their closure.

Afghanistan's leaders argue that Pakistan's approval for the madrassas is proof that it backs the Taliban.

Shah scoffed at the notion the madrassa encouraged violence, but he defended the right to target foreign

troops. "If someone armed enters your house and you are threatened... then definitely you will raise a gun," Shah said.

The seminary's late leader Sami-ul-Haq boasted of advising the Taliban's founder Mullah Omar -- earning him the moniker "the father of the Taliban". Haq later sent students to fight for the movement when it issued a call to arms during its rise to power in the 1990s.

The Haqqani network, the Taliban's ultra-violent faction, is named after the madrassa where its leader once taught and subsequent leaders studied.

Some Pakistani extremists who later attacked their own country have also been linked to the seminary, including the suicide bomber who assassinated former prime minister Benazir Bhutto.

Hardline madrassas received a major boost and an influx of cash during the 1980s when they served as de facto supply lines to the anti-Soviet jihad backed by the US and Saudi Arabia, and have remained close to Pakistan's security establishment ever since.

Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan's party has also lavished the Haqqania seminary with millions of dollars in return for its political support.



People react after Peru's interim President Manuel Merino announced his resignation facing street protests, in Lima, Peru, on Sunday. Manuel Merino only assumed office on Tuesday, a day after the assembly impeached predecessor Martin Vizcarra on corruption charges.

PHOTO: REUTERS