

US ties at 'crossroads'

Says China FM, disputes coronavirus's origin theories

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China's relationship with the United States has reached a "new crossroads" and could get back on the right track following a period of "unprecedented difficulty", senior diplomat Wang Yi said in official comments published yesterday.

Relations between the world's two biggest economies have come under increasing strain amid a series of disputes over trade, human rights and the origins of Covid-19. In its latest move, the United States blacklisted dozens of Chinese companies it said had ties to the military.

Wang, China's state councillor and foreign minister, said in a joint interview with Xinhua news agency and other state media outlets that recent US policies towards China had harmed the interests of both countries and brought huge dangers to the world.

But there was now an opportunity for the two sides to "open a new window of hope" and begin a new round of dialogue, he said.

The election of Joe Biden as US president has been widely expected to improve relations between Washington and Beijing after four years of escalating tensions under the administration of Donald Trump.

However, President-elect Biden, who will take office on Jan. 20, has continued to criticise China for its "abuses" on trade and

other issues.

Wang did not mention Trump or Biden by name, but he urged the United States to "respect the social system and development path" chosen by China, adding that if Washington "learns lessons", the conflicts between the two sides could be resolved.

"We know some people in the United States are apprehensive about China's rapid development, but the most sustainable leadership is to constantly move forward yourself, rather than block the development of other countries," he said.

Politicians in the United States have accused China of covering up the outbreak of Covid-19 during its early stages, delaying its response and allowing the disease to spread much further and faster.

But Wang said China had done its utmost to combat the virus's spread, "sounding the alarm" for the rest of the world.

"We raced against time, and were the earliest to report the epidemic to the world," he said. "More and more studies show that the epidemic very probably emerged in many places throughout the world."

Wang's comments echo those of some of China's top health officials and state media, as the government has sought to reshape the narrative on the origin of the virus.

But Wang is the most senior government official to promote the idea, which has been welcomed domestically but shunned by most Western audiences.



Debris from houses lies covered in snow as rescue crews work in the landslide area at Ask, Gjerdrum, Norway, yesterday. Rescuers yesterday found another dead body and continued searching for 8 other people, including a toddler and a 13-year-old, still missing days after a mudslide destroyed homes in a Norwegian village, the authorities said. An entire hillside collapsed in Ask, 25 kilometres northeast of the capital Oslo overnight Tuesday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Legal bid to get Pence to overturn results fails

REUTERS, Washington

A federal judge on Friday rejected a lawsuit from a Republican congressman that sought to allow Vice President Mike Pence to reject Electoral College votes for Joe Biden when Congress meets on Jan. 6 to certify his victory over President Donald Trump.

The latest long-shot attempt by Trump's Republican allies to overturn the Nov. 3 election was dismissed by one of Trump's own appointees to the federal bench, Jeremy Korman. He ruled that US Representative Louie Gohmert of Texas and a slate of Republican electors from Arizona could not show they suffered any personal harm "fairly traceable" to Pence's allegedly unlawful conduct and, therefore, lacked legal standing to bring the case.

Trump has refused to concede defeat to Democrat Biden and has repeatedly falsely claimed the election was tainted by widespread fraud. He and his allies have lost dozens of court efforts seeking to reverse the election results. Biden beat President Donald Trump by a 306-232 margin in the Electoral College and is set to be sworn in on Jan. 20.

Gohmert's suit argued that Pence had discretion to decide what votes should count. They also asked the judge to bar Pence from following the Electoral Count Act of 1887, which lays out how objections to votes are handled by Congress.

Some Republicans have said they plan to object to the count of presidential electors next week in Congress. Reuters reported this week the effort could trigger a lengthy debate in the Senate but has virtually no chance of overturning the results.

US DEFENSE BILL

Senate overrides Trump's veto

AFP, Washington

The US Congress on Friday dealt Donald Trump a humiliating blow in his last days in office with the Senate voting overwhelmingly to override his veto of a sweeping defense bill -- the first time lawmakers have done so during his presidency.

By a lopsided vote of 81-13, well more than the two-thirds of the 100-member chamber required, the Republican-controlled Senate approved the \$740.5 billion National Defense Authorization Act to fund the military for fiscal year 2021.

The Democratic-led House of Representatives had voted 322 to 87 on Monday to override Trump's veto.

Both houses of Congress had easily passed the legislation in early December by strong majorities, but Trump, citing a litany of objections, vetoed it on December 23.

"It's time for us to deliver this bill," Republican Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell said at the start of



Friday's session. "It's our chance to remind brave service members and their families that we have their backs."

The vote completed a stunning rebuke in the waning weeks of Trump's presidency.

New members will be sworn in today, just 17 days before Democrat Joe Biden is inaugurated to succeed Trump.

Breaking with members of his party, Trump had criticized the defense bill on numerous grounds. He called it a "gift" to China and Russia and said it restricted his ability to lower troop numbers in Afghanistan, South Korea

and elsewhere.

Trump had bristled at language to rename military installations that currently honor leaders of the breakaway Civil War-era, pro-slavery Confederacy. He also insisted the bill should include a repeal of a federal law, known as Section 230, that provides liability protection to internet companies such as Facebook, Twitter and Google, which he regularly accuses of anti-conservative bias.

"Our Republican Senate just missed the opportunity to get rid of Section 230, which gives unlimited power to Big Tech companies," Trump tweeted after the vote. "Pathetic!!!"

Referring to the Senate's refusal to vote first on a motion to increase pandemic aid checks, he added, "Now they want to give people ravaged by the China Virus \$600, rather than the \$2000 which they so desperately need," using a term he applies to the coronavirus that has been widely decried as racist and fanning conspiracy theories.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Kazakhstan abolishes death penalty

Kazakhstan abolished the death penalty, making permanent a nearly two-decade freeze on capital punishment in the authoritarian Central Asian country, a notice on the presidential website said yesterday. The notice said President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev had signed off on parliamentary ratification of the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights -- a document that commits signatories to the abolition of capital punishment. Executions were paused in Kazakhstan from 2003 but courts continued to sentence convicts to death in exceptional circumstances, including for crimes deemed acts of terror.

Seven bodies wash up on Algeria beach

The bodies of seven people, believed to be migrants who drowned trying to reach Europe, washed up on an Algerian beach yesterday, the emergency services said. The bodies of the three men and four women had started decomposing and their identities were not immediately clear, the emergency services said. Winds of up to 70 kilometres (45 miles) per hour had swept the seas off the northwestern port city of Mostaganem in recent days. According to the most recent report from EU border control agency Frontex, more than 3,700 migrants crossed the western Mediterranean in the first five months of 2020, around half of them Algerians.

Over 370,000 children born on New Year's Day: Unicef



The UN children's Fund (Unicef) have said an estimated 371,504 babies were expected to be born around the world on the first day of 2021. "The children born today enter a world far different than even a year ago, and a New Year brings a new opportunity to reimagine it," said Unicef Executive Director Henrietta Fore in a press release. Globally, over half of these births are estimated to take place in 10 countries: India (59,995), China (35,615), Nigeria (21,439), Pakistan (14,161), Indonesia (12,336), Ethiopia (12,006), the United States (10,312), Egypt (9,455), Bangladesh (9,236) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (8,640). In total, an estimated 140 million children will be born in 2021. Their average life expectancy is 84 years, added the press release.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS



Women queue to pay tribute to Iranian military commander General Qassem Soleimani as they visit his grave during the one year anniversary of his killing in a US attack, at his hometown of Kerman, Iran, yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

Israel leads the world in vaccination drive

Inoculates 1m in less than two weeks; Bangkok imposes partial lockdown

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Israel says it has vaccinated one million people -- more than a tenth of its population -- against Covid-19, as it rolls out one of the world's earliest and most rapid inoculation campaigns.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Health Minister Yuli Edelstein hailed the millionth vaccination on Friday in Umm al-Fahm, a predominantly Arab city in the country's north.

Israel has administered the first dose of vaccine to more than 10 percent of the population, according to Edelstein, less than two weeks after the launch of its inoculation campaign. The goal is to vaccinate 5.5 million people in the country of 9.3 million, Netanyahu said.

According to Oxford-based researchers, Israel is vaccinating its population at a speed unmatched anywhere else in the world. A graphic on the website Our World in Data comparing the number of people vaccinated in each country per 100 residents showed a clear lead for Israel at 11.55, accurate as of Friday -- even if the country lags behind countries like the United States and China in absolute numbers.

Meanwhile, Bangkok's nightlife will go quiet as a ban on bars, nightclubs and restaurant alcohol sales went into effect yesterday, among a raft of restrictions aimed at curbing the kingdom's rising coronavirus toll.

Thailand initially appeared to have escaped the worst of the virus, registering just under 4,000 total cases in November, despite becoming the second country to detect an infection, early last year.

But an outbreak last month at a massive seafood market has spiralled into a resurgence, with infections now detected in 53 of the kingdom's 77 provinces. By yesterday, the caseload had jumped to over 7,300.

2008 MUMBAI ATTACK

Pakistan arrests mastermind on terror financing charge

REUTERS, Lahore

Pakistan yesterday arrested a man accused of being a leader of an Islamist militant group blamed by the United States and India for the 2008 Mumbai attacks, a counter-terrorism official said.

The arrest is in relation to terrorism financing, the official said, and not a specific militant attack.

"Proscribed organisation LeT (Lashkar-e-Taiba) leader Zaki ur Rehman Lakhvi (has been) arrested on charges of terrorism financing," a spokesman for the Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) of the Pakistani province of Punjab said.

The suspect is said to have been running a medical dispensary to collect and disburse funds for militant activities, the spokesman said.

A UN Security Council sanctions committee says Lakhvi is LeT's chief of operations and accuses him of being



involved in militant activity in a number of other regions and countries, including Chechnya, Bosnia, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Indian authorities said the lone surviving gunman in the 2008 Mumbai siege, in which 166 people were killed, had told interrogators before his execution that the assailants were in touch with Lakhvi.

India has long called on Pakistan to bring Lakhvi to trial, but Islamabad says Delhi has not provided concrete evidence to try the LeT leader. He was first arrested in 2008 but was later released on bail.

Imran Gill, Lakhvi's lawyer, confirmed the arrest and told Reuters his case would be heard next week. He did not respond to further questions.

Another man that India says was the mastermind of the Mumbai siege, Hafiz Saeed, was convicted by a Pakistani court on two charges of terrorism financing last year. Saeed denies involvement in the Mumbai attacks.

Five women killed in Yemen wedding attack

AFP, Hodeida

Five women were killed when a projectile exploded at a New Year's Day wedding party in Yemen's Red Sea city of Hodeida, the latest atrocity in the war-torn nation.

The government and Huthi rebels blamed each other for the Friday night attack near Hodeida's airport. Local officials said five women were killed, and children were among seven others wounded, when what appeared to be an artillery shell hit the wedding venue.

Tens of thousands of people, mostly civilians, have been killed and millions displaced in Yemen's grinding six-year war, which has triggered what the United Nations calls the world's worst humanitarian disaster.



Journalists and mourners carry the coffin of TV reporter Adeb al-Janani who was killed in an attack on Aden airport, during his funeral in Taiz, Yemen, yesterday. The attack killed at least 22 people.

PHOTO: REUTERS