



Fireworks are seen above the White House at the end of the Inauguration day for US President Joe Biden in Washington, DC, on Wednesday; Biden and first lady Jill Biden watch fireworks from the White House; and the 46th US president signs executive orders in the Oval Office of the White House.



PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS

US Senate control shifts to Democrats

AFP, Washington

Two Georgia Democrats were sworn in Wednesday as the newest members of the US Senate, handing their party control of the upper chamber just hours after President Joe Biden took office.

With Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock -- who ousted two Republicans in a pair of January 5 run-offs -- being formally seated, the body now stands deadlocked at 50-50.

That means Democrats control the chamber because new Vice President Kamala Harris acts as the tie-breaking vote.

Harris, herself a former senator from California, presided over the session just hours after becoming vice president, and swore in the two Georgia men and her own replacement, Alex Padilla.

By flipping the Senate and holding the House of Representatives in last November's election, Democrats now control all levels of power in Washington in a period of heightened political partisanship following the four-year presidency of Donald Trump.

That provides Biden an avenue to push through some of his key legislative priorities on climate change, immigration, and a \$1.9 trillion relief package to help American families and businesses devastated by the coronavirus pandemic.

Senate control should mean Biden will have an easier time getting his cabinet members and judge picks confirmed. But passing aggressive legislation is likely to be a far more difficult proposition.

Among the Democratic Senate's first orders of business: the impeachment trial of Trump, who is no longer president but could face a lifetime ban on serving in public office if he is convicted.

US IN TRANSITION

Biden's nominee for intel chief gets Senate approval

The US Senate voted Wednesday to confirm former CIA official Avril Haines as director of national intelligence, making her the first member of newly-inaugurated President Joe Biden's cabinet to gain approval. Senate Democrats and Republicans gave strong support to Haines, voting 84-10 to make her the first woman ever to lead the 18 entities of the US intelligence community. Biden and the Senate are moving quickly to get key members of his government in place, with votes expected in the coming days on the secretaries of defense, state and the Treasury. Haines, 51, is a veteran of the intelligence world, having served as deputy CIA director and deputy national security advisor in the previous Obama-Biden administration.

Biden says Trump wrote him 'very generous letter'

President Joe Biden said Wednesday that outgoing president Donald Trump had left him a "very generous" letter in the Oval Office, in keeping with tradition. "The president wrote a very generous letter," Biden told reporters at the White House. "Because it's private, I will not talk about it until I talk to him," he said. It was unclear until Wednesday whether Trump would maintain the tradition of outgoing presidents leaving notes for their successors, after he opted to skip Biden's inauguration and never formally congratulated him on his election win.

Greta wishes 'old man' Trump a 'wonderful future'

Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg on Wednesday renewed a feud with Donald Trump, saying the outgoing US president "seems like a very happy old man looking forward to a bright and wonderful future". The teenager was reversing a barb that Trump -- who frequently disputes the science behind climate change -- had aimed at her in 2019 when he wrote on Twitter that "she seems like a very happy young girl looking forward to a bright and wonderful future". The tweet was a sarcastic response to a fiery speech given by Thunberg at the United Nations where she told world leaders: "You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. How dare you?" In response, Thunberg later modified her Twitter biography, referring to herself as "a very happy young girl looking forward to a bright and wonderful future".

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

China wants reset in US ties

Slaps sanctions on Pompeo, Trump officials; Taiwan official's presence in Biden's inauguration angers Beijing

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday congratulated US President Joe Biden on his inauguration and called for a reset in relations between Beijing and Washington after a corrosive period of diplomacy under Donald Trump.

Beijing also welcomed news that the US would rejoin the World Health Organization and the Paris climate accord, as Biden tried to immediately pivot his office back to a key role in global leadership.

The ever-antagonistic Trump harangued China over trade, rights, the origins of the Covid-19 virus, tech and defence supremacy, prompting angry near-daily jousts between both countries' diplomats.

The new US president is expected to remain tough on the superpower rival but soften after Trump's divisive "America First" approach.

"With cooperation from both sides, the better angels in China-US



relations will beat the evil forces," foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying told a press briefing.

She said Biden had used the word "unity" several times in his inauguration speech, and that it was "precisely what is needed currently in US-China relations".

Beijing laid into "clown-like" Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in the final hours of his tenure, before sanctioning him and more than two dozen advisors and ex-officials in the former president's administration.

The officials and their family members will be prohibited from

entering mainland China, Hong Kong and Macau, the foreign ministry said.

There were still signs of tension on the horizon, however, as it emerged that a representative of the self-ruled island of Taiwan was formally invited to the US inauguration for the first time since 1979.

Hua yesterday warned that China wanted the US to "cautiously and appropriately handle Taiwan issues to prevent harm to US-China relations."

The Biden administration is expected to keep the pressure on China over trade and human rights. Treasury secretary Janet Yellen vowed Tuesday to "take on China's abusive, unfair and illegal practices" in trade, while new Secretary of State Antony Blinken has said he stands by his predecessor's declaration that China was committing genocide against Uighurs and other mostly Muslim people in Xinjiang.

He also said he principally agrees with Trump's policy on China.

Delicate dance

Handing off the US 'nuclear football'

AFP, Washington

When an outgoing president hands the keys to the White House to the incoming one, another discrete handover takes place: the systems and codes for the US leader to launch a nuclear strike.

On Wednesday Donald Trump's huffy refusal to attend successor Joe Biden's inauguration created an unprecedented challenge.

Trump travelled to Florida three hours before Biden was sworn in and, as he was still president, he took with him the nuclear "football," the bag containing the procedures and equipment for a launch.

He also would have had in his pocket the "biscuit" -- a card of authentication codes for embarking on a nuclear launch that only the president can use.

Biden, though, needed the launch codes and communications at his side from the moment he became president and commander in chief, at noon in Washington.

So for the first time in a transfer of presidential power, there was a second active "football" -- actually a hefty black leather briefcase always carried by the president's military aide -- for the occasion.

At noon, just as he took the oath of office, Biden had a military officer standing nearby with the duplicate nuclear briefcase, and he received his own biscuit. Trump's meanwhile expired, like an outdated credit card.

While it was a new test of maintaining unbroken presidential control over conducting nuclear war, it wasn't actually too difficult.

There are always three footballs around: one with the president, another with the vice president in case he has to assume power, and third backup.

In the final days of Trump's administration, and especially after the January 6 attack on the Congress by supporters of Trump, some concern was expressed about him retaining the power to order a nuclear attack.

Rich nations 'exaggerate' climate finance: study

AFP, Paris

Rich countries have over-reported finance to help countries adapt to the impacts of climate change by \$20 billion over the last decade, leaving at-risk communities drastically underfunded, a new analysis showed yesterday.

Under the 2015 Paris climate deal, countries are required to boost funding to hard-hit governments, evenly split between cash to mitigate global warming and to help them adapt to future climate impacts.

Developed countries promised to provide \$50 billion in annual finance for adaptation by 2020. But official OECD figures show that in 2018 donors committed just \$16.8 billion.

The true figure, according to an analysis by green group CARE International, is in fact far lower: just \$9.7 billion.

CARE and its partner organisations in Africa and southeast Asia assessed 112 climate adaptation projects funded by 25 donor nations equivalent to 13 percent of total global adaptation finance between 2013-2017.

They found that the funding for adaption in these projects had been over reported by 42 percent. Applying that figure to remaining projects, CARE said that adaptation finance had been over-reported by \$20 billion during the same period.

It said several countries and donors had overblown their adaptation grants by including finance for construction projects such as housing and roads not related to the climate at all.

The United Nations last week said countries were falling short of their Paris pledges by failing to fund vulnerable nations' climate fight.

It said the true cost of adaptation -- reducing the fallout among communities and increasing their capacity to deal with climate-related disasters such as floods and drought -- was currently around \$70 billion annually. But that figure could swell as high as \$300 billion a year by the end of the decade, it said.



A supporter of former US president Donald Trump holds a placard while he was returning from Washington after President Joe Biden's inauguration, in West Palm Beach, Florida, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Twin suicide bombing in Baghdad kill 32, hurt 110

AFP, Baghdad

A rare twin suicide bombing killed 32 people and wounded 110 at a crowded market in central Baghdad yesterday, Iraq's health ministry said, the city's deadliest attack in three years.

The first attacker drew a crowd at the bustling market in the capital's Tayaran Square by claiming to feel sick, then detonated his explosives belt, the interior ministry said. As more people then flocked to the scene to help the victims, a second suicide bomber set off his explosives.

The open-air market, where second-hand clothes are sold at stalls, had been teeming with people.

An AFP photographer at the scene said security forces had cordoned off the area, where blood-soaked clothes were strewn across the muddy streets and paramedics were rushing to take away the casualties.

The health ministry said those who lost their lives had died on the scene of the

attack, and that most of the wounded had been treated and released from hospital.

The attack was the bloodiest in Baghdad since January 2018, when a suicide bomber killed 30 people in the same square.

The attack was not immediately claimed but suicide bombings have been used by jihadist groups, most recently the Islamic State group.

They were commonplace in Baghdad during the sectarian bloodletting that followed the US-led invasion of 2003 and later on as the IS swept across much of Iraq and also targeted the capital. But with the group's territorial defeat in late 2017, suicide bombings in the city became rare.

President Barham Saleh led political figures in condemning yesterday's attack, saying the government would "stand firmly against these rogue attempts to destabilise our country".

Pope Francis, who hopes to visit Iraq in March, deplored the "senseless act of brutality".

Shipwreck off Libya leaves 43 dead: UN

AFP, Geneva

At least 43 migrants perished in the first major shipwreck off the Libyan coast this year, the United Nations said Wednesday, adding that 10 people were rescued.

The UN agencies for refugees and for migration said they were "deeply saddened" by the tragedy. The shipwreck, they said, happened Tuesday after a boat that set off from the city of Zawya capsized just a few hours after departure when its engine stopped in poor sea conditions.

Survivors, who were mainly from the Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Ghana and Gambia, said those who perished were all men from West African countries, the UN agencies added.

The shipwreck was the first of 2021 off Libya, but comes after hundreds of people lost their lives last year trying to cross the central Mediterranean to Europe -- making it the most deadly migration route in the world.

In their statement, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the UNHCR said they feared that "due to the limited ability to monitor routes", the actual number of deaths last year "could be much higher".

"This loss of life highlights once more the need for re-activation of state-led search and rescue operations, a gap NGO and commercial vessels are trying to fill despite their limited resources," they said.

The agencies also reiterated their call on the international community to urgently shift its approach to the situation in the Mediterranean.

MISTREATMENT OF COVID-INFECTED MOTHER

Mongolian PM resigns

AFP, Ulaanbaatar

Mongolia's prime minister resigned yesterday following protests and public outrage over the treatment of a coronavirus patient and her newborn baby.

Landlocked Mongolia reported just a handful of Covid-19 cases last year after imposing strict border controls, but in November its first domestic transmissions caused a new wave of lockdowns and restrictions.

Anger mounted this week after TV footage showed a woman who appeared to have recently given birth being moved to an infectious disease centre wearing only hospital pyjamas and plastic slippers, despite temperatures dipping to minus 25 degrees Celsius.

After protests outside government buildings on Wednesday, the Mongolian politician apologised on behalf of the government and said he would stand down immediately.

"Unfortunately, we made mistake during relocating that mother," admitted Prime Minister Khurelsukh Ukhnaa yesterday. "It was heartbreaking to see how she was treated."

"As a prime minister, I must take the responsibility."

The video of the woman in an ambulance clutching her baby prompted fierce criticism, particularly as Mongolian tradition dictates new mothers should avoid the cold weather and cold food for the first month after birth.

On Wednesday around 5,000 mostly young protesters gathered in a square opposite government buildings in the capital Ulaanbaatar, some carrying wrapped up bundles to represent babies.

The vice prime minister -- also head of the national emergency commission handling the pandemic -- had already resigned on Wednesday evening, followed by the minister of health. The head of the hospital and disease centre in the middle of the row also resigned.

Political instability has been a constant problem for the young Central Asian democracy, which passed its first constitution in 1992 after decades of Communist rule.

As the prime minister stands down, President Battulga Khaltmaa remains in place as head of state.