

Coup just a 'cabinet reshuffle'

Says Chinese media

AFP, Beijing

The military takeover in Myanmar and detention of Aung San Suu Kyi was "a major cabinet reshuffle" according to Chinese state media, who rolled out the euphemisms to avoid calling a coup a coup.

As democratic leaders around the world slammed the Burmese military and President Joe Biden said the US was "taking note" of who was standing up for Myanmar's people, China's communist leadership took a softly-softly approach.

Beijing called for all parties in Myanmar to "resolve their differences", and the official Xinhua news agency on Monday described the military replacing elected ministers after the coup as a "major cabinet reshuffle".

The nationalist Global Times meanwhile quoted unnamed experts as saying the generals' power-grab could be seen as "an adjustment to the country's dysfunctional power structure".



This screengrab taken from APTV video footage shows soldiers at the entrance to a guesthouse, where members of parliament reside at, in the capital Naypyidaw yesterday, as Myanmar's generals appeared in firm control a day after a surgical coup that saw Aung San Suu Kyi detained.

PHOTO: AFP

NEWS IN BRIEF

S'pore limits contact-tracing data access after outcry

Singapore's parliament passed a law yesterday limiting the use of data collected for coronavirus contact-tracing after the government admitted it could be accessed by police, sparking privacy concerns. The city-state last year rolled out a programme called "TraceTogether" for tracking close contacts of Covid-19 patients that works via both a phone app and dongle, but uptake was initially slow. It rose to more than 80 percent of residents after government assurances the data would only be used to fight the virus and a decision to make it mandatory for accessing some public places. But there was an outcry last month when officials admitted police could access information gathered in the scheme as part of investigations, and had already done so during a murder probe.

Kremlin critic Navalny in court facing prison term

The Kremlin's most prominent critic Alexei Navalny was in a Moscow courtroom yesterday facing several years in prison, after his arrest last month triggered protests across Russia and Western condemnation. The 44-year-old anti-corruption campaigner was detained on January 17 when he returned to Moscow



from Germany, where he had spent months recovering from a nerve agent poisoning in August that he blames on President Vladimir Putin. Tens of thousands have taken to the streets of Moscow and other cities over the last two weekends to call for Navalny's release, prompting a massive police clampdown that saw several thousand people arrested. The case is presenting one of the most serious challenges to the Kremlin in years and has led to calls for new Western sanctions against Russian authorities.

Congress elects Bolsonaro allies as new leaders

Brazil's Congress on Monday elected two allies of President Jair Bolsonaro to head the Senate and lower house, an important victory for the far-right leader as he seeks to re-galvanize his reelection efforts for 2022. Arthur Lira of the Progressives (PP) won in the first round of votes for speaker of the Chamber of Deputies by 302 votes out of 513. Earlier, the Democrats' (DEM) Rodrigo Pacheco was elected Senate speaker with 57 out of 81 votes. Bolsonaro hailed the results on Twitter, posting photos of himself with the new congressional leaders. He had gotten personally involved in the leadership battles in both houses of the legislature, looking to improve his troubled relations with Congress and stave off the 61 impeachment requests he is facing.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

US SANCTIONS IN RESPONSE TO MYANMAR COUP

What are Biden's options?

REUTERS, Washington

US President Joe Biden, facing his first major international crisis after Myanmar's military seized power, could impose a new program of sanctions, cut aid or target generals and the companies they run to pressure for a return to democracy.

How the new US administration responds will be an early test of Biden's dual pledges to re-center human rights in US foreign policy and work more closely with allies.

Biden on Monday pledged to "stand up for democracy" and threatened to re-impose sanctions gradually rolled back by former President Barack Obama after Myanmar's generals initiated democratic reforms and released many political prisoners a decade ago.

The Trump administration hit four military commanders, including the top general Min Aung Hlaing,



with such sanctions after a brutal 2017 purge that drove more than 700,000 members of the Rohingya minority from their homes and into neighboring Bangladesh.

Biden could establish a fresh sanctions program against Myanmar with an executive order that would declare a national emergency regarding developments in the country, said Peter Kucik, a former senior sanctions adviser at the US

Treasury.

Activist groups including Human Rights Watch have joined calls for Biden to target companies run by the military.

The military's two major conglomerates Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited (MEHL) and Myanmar Economic Corp (MEC) are sprawling holding companies with investments spanning various sectors including banking, gems, copper, telecoms and clothing.

State Department officials had prepared Magnitsky sanctions against the companies in 2018 in response to violence against the Rohingya, but had not gone through with them, said Kelley Currie, US ambassador-at-large for global women's issues under former President Donald Trump, who was deeply involved in that administration's Myanmar policy.

The Lady vanishes

NLD lawmaker says Suu Kyi under house arrest at her official residence

AFP, Bangkok

The Myanmar military's detention of Aung San Suu Kyi during this week's coup has revived memories of her more than 15 years of house arrest at a lakeside villa in Yangon during the country's last period of junta rule.

Under the cover of darkness early Monday, soldiers took Myanmar's de facto leader -- who became a beacon for democracy in the 1990s and a Nobel Peace Prize laureate -- back into custody.

A lawmaker from her National League for Democracy (NLD) party, who requested anonymity, said Suu Kyi was under house arrest again, this time at her official residence in the capital Naypyidaw.

"We were informed not to worry. However we are worrying. It will be a relief if we can see a photo," he said.

NLD press officer Kyi Toe said neighbours had spotted Suu Kyi walking around within the walls of her compound yesterday morning.

Yangon-based analyst Khin Zaw Win said it appeared Suu Kyi was safe for now. "All reports indicate she is not in danger," he said.

But it is likely the military has made a strategic decision to keep her hidden. Herve Lemahieu from Australia's Lowy Institute said. "I think the idea is very much to keep her away from public view... she's being kept in Naypyidaw... far from all the major population centres where protesters may rally. I think that's a deliberate choice," Lemahieu told AFP.

It is in the military's interest to ensure Suu Kyi remains in good health, he said.

INDIA FARMERS' PROTESTS

Twitter blocks accounts, tweets on gov't order

AFP, New Delhi

Twitter on Monday temporarily blocked scores of accounts and tweets in India at the government's request, including those of a prominent news magazine and farmers staging mass protests in the capital.

An IT ministry source told AFP the government had directed the social media giant to act against about 250 Twitter accounts and tweets that posed a "grave threat to public order". The accounts were blocked on Monday afternoon but were accessible again hours later.

Tens of thousands of farmers have been protesting since November 26 in camps on the outskirts of New Delhi against the deregulation of India's agriculture sector.

One rally last week turned into a deadly rampage. Since then, police have detained dozens of farmers and a journalist who writes for Caravan magazine.

Caravan, farmer activists, some opposition leaders, an actor and an economist were among those whose Twitter accounts were blocked. A Twitter spokeswoman said "it may be necessary to withhold access to certain content in a particular country from time to time" if "a properly scoped" request is made.

Mediate US return to nuke deal

Iran asks Europe after diplomatic standoff

AFP, Washington

Iran's foreign minister asked the European Union to coordinate a synchronized return of both Washington and Tehran into a nuclear deal, after a diplomatic standoff on who will act first.

US President Joe Biden has voiced support for returning to the accord, from which Donald Trump exited, but has insisted that Tehran first resume full compliance by reversing measures it took to protest the sweeping sanctions imposed by his predecessor.

Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, who has previously demanded an end to sanctions before Iran acts, offered a way forward during an interview on CNN International Monday.

"You know clearly there can be a mechanism to basically either synchronize it, or coordinate what can be done," he told interviewer Christiane Amanpour.

Zarif said that EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell should play a role in his position of coordinator of the 2015 agreement -- which also included Britain, France and Germany as well as Russia and China.

Borrell can "sort of choreograph the actions that are needed to be taken by the United States and the actions that are needed to be taken by Iran," Zarif said.

"The United States needs to come back into compliance and Iran will be ready immediately to respond. The timing is not the issue."

Trump walked out of the deal negotiated under former president Barack Obama, vowing instead to strangle Iran's economy. The Biden administration argues that Trump's actions badly backfired, with Iran both moving away from the nuclear deal and only intensifying its opposition to US interests.



People make a giant snow ball during a winter storm at Brighton Beach, New York, US, on Monday. A huge snowstorm has brought chaos to US east coast, shuttering airports, closing schools and forcing the postponement of coronavirus vaccinations into yesterday morning.

PHOTO: REUTERS

STAFF SAFETY

N Ireland halts post-Brexit checks

AFP, Dublin

The British government yesterday condemned threats to port workers implementing controversial post-Brexit trade checks in Northern Ireland, calling for clear heads to ease fears of an upsurge in sectarian tensions.

Checks were suspended at Belfast and Larne ports late Monday, and the European Commission said staff working at two border posts in the British province were told to stay away.

The development comes just over a month into new trading arrangements after Brexit took full effect, and warnings it could stoke lingering sectarian sentiment in Northern Ireland.

Trump aimed mob 'like a loaded cannon' at Capitol

Democrats argue in impeachment

REUTERS, Washington

The US House of Representatives Democrats who will prosecute former President Donald Trump in his second impeachment trial said in a brief filed yesterday he pointed a mob "like a loaded cannon" at the Capitol shortly before a deadly January 6 rampage.

Trump also faced a Tuesday deadline to respond to the article of impeachment passed by the Democratic-led House on January 13 charging him with inciting insurrection in his speech to supporters before the rampage at the Capitol that left five people dead including a police officer.

The nine House Democrats, known as House impeachment managers, in their brief also rejected Republican claims that it would be unconstitutional to put Trump on trial in the Senate since he became a private citizen after leaving office on January 20.

"There is no 'January Exception' to

impeachment or any other provision of the Constitution," the managers said in the brief.

"He summoned a mob to Washington, exhorted them into a frenzy, and aimed them like a loaded cannon down Pennsylvania Avenue. As the Capitol was overrun, President Trump was reportedly 'delighted,' they said.

Trump is just the third president to have been impeached, the first to be impeached twice and the first to face trial after leaving office. Members of the 100-seat Senate will serve as jurors in his impeachment trial, due to begin next week.

Convicting Trump would require a two-thirds vote, meaning that 17 Republicans would need to join the Senate's 50 Democrats in voting to convict. That presents a daunting hurdle for Democrats. A conviction could lead to a second vote banning Trump from holding public office again.



A fire driven by strong winds burns on a ridge in the suburb of Brigadoon in Perth, Australia yesterday, forcing emergency evacuations just days after the west coast city entered a coronavirus lockdown.

PHOTO: AFP