

US won't allow China to abuse int'l system

Says Blinken as he presses Beijing on Uighurs, Hong Kong; Germany, France, UK, US agree 'to revive ties'

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken pressed Beijing on its treatment of Uighurs, Tibetans and Hong Kong while China defended its policies in the first conversation between top officials of the two powers since President Joe Biden took office.

"I made clear the US will defend our national interests, stand up for our democratic values, and hold Beijing accountable for its abuses of the international system," Blinken said on Twitter of his call with senior Chinese official Yang Jiechi.

Blinken told Yang that the United States "will continue to stand up for human rights and democratic values, including in Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong," a State Department statement said of the call, which took place on Friday Washington time.

Blinken also "pressed China to join the international community in condemning the military coup in Burma," it said, using the former name of Myanmar.

The top US diplomat said the United States would hold Beijing "accountable for its efforts to threaten stability in the Indo-Pacific, including across the Taiwan Strait,

and its undermining of the rules-based international system."

The tough tone comes after Blinken in his confirmation hearing said he would continue former president Donald Trump's approach to China in a rare point of agreement between the two administrations.

Yang however warned on the call that Hong Kong, Xinjiang and Tibet were "China's internal affairs" and "no external forces are allowed to interfere," urging the United States to "correct mistakes" made in recent years, the Chinese embassy to the US said in a statement.

He also called on Washington to "strictly abide by the one China principle" under which Beijing considers Taiwan an inseparable part of its territory, saying "the Taiwan issue is the most important and sensitive core issue in China-US relations."

Earlier on Friday, the foreign ministers of Germany, France, Britain and the United States said they wanted "to revive" the transatlantic relationship.

"The foreign ministers agreed that they want to revive the traditionally close transatlantic partnership and tackle global challenges together in future," the German foreign ministry said in a statement.



Riot police gather as protesters take part in a demonstration against the military coup in Yangon, yesterday. Thousands of people took to the streets of Yangon yesterday to denounce this week's coup and demand the release of elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi despite a blockade on the internet by the junta.

PHOTO: AFP

'WAR CRIMES' IN PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES

ICC paves way for criminal probe

Says it has jurisdiction in the territories; US expresses 'serious concerns'

REUTERS, The Hague

Judges at the International Criminal Court on Friday found the court has jurisdiction over war crimes committed in the Palestinian territories, paving the way for a possible criminal investigation, despite Israeli objections.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu denounced the ICC as a "political body" while the United States said it had "serious concerns" over the decision. The Palestinians called it a "victory for justice".

ICC Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda said her office was studying the decision and would decide what to do next "guided strictly by its independent and impartial mandate" to prosecute grave war crimes and atrocities when countries are unable or unwilling to do so themselves.

The ICC judges said their decision was based on the fact that Palestine has been granted membership to the tribunal's founding treaty, and had referred the situation to the court. The judges said the jurisdiction decision does not imply any attempt to determine Palestinian statehood, which is uncertain, or national borders.



"The Court's territorial jurisdiction in the Situation in Palestine ... extends to the territories occupied by Israel since 1967, namely Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem," they said. Bensouda had found in December 2019 that "war crimes have been or are being committed in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip."

She named both the Israeli Defense Forces

and armed Palestinian groups such as Hamas as possible perpetrators.

She said then that she saw no reason not to open an investigation, but asked judges to first rule on whether the situation fell under the court's jurisdiction.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu denounced the decision, saying in a video statement: "When the ICC investigates Israel for fake war crimes, this is pure antisemitism."

Human Rights Watch called the decision "pivotal" and said it "finally offers victims of serious crimes some real hope for justice after a half century of impunity".

The Palestinian Foreign Ministry said in a statement that it was a "historic day for the principle of accountability."

US State Department spokesman Ned Price wrote on Twitter: "The United States objects to today's @IntCrimCourt decision regarding the Palestinian situation."

"We will continue to uphold President Biden's strong commitment to Israel and its security, including opposing actions that seek to target Israel unfairly," Price added.

US to revoke terrorist label on Huthis

AFP, Washington

The US has moved to delist Yemen's Huthi rebels as a terrorist organization, removing a block that humanitarian groups said jeopardized crucial aid as the country's warring sides cautiously welcomed a push for peace by President Joe Biden.

The grinding six-year war in Yemen has killed tens of thousands and displaced millions, triggering what the United Nations calls the world's worst humanitarian disaster.

A State Department spokesperson said Friday they had "formally notified Congress" of Secretary of State Antony Blinken's intent to revoke the terrorist designations.

The move, which will take effect shortly, comes a day after Biden announced an end to US support for the Saudi-led offensive operations in Yemen.

"This decision has nothing to do with our view of the Huthis and their reprehensible conduct, including attacks against civilians and the kidnapping of American citizens," the spokesperson said. The US remained committed to helping Saudi Arabia defend its territory against attacks by the rebels, he added.

Aid groups say they have no choice but to deal with the Huthis, who are the de facto government in much of Yemen, and that the terrorist designation would put them at risk of prosecution in the United States.

According to the UN, more than three million people have been displaced and close to 80 percent of Yemen's population of 29 million people need of some form of aid for survival.



'Erratic' Trump shouldn't get intel briefings

Says Biden

AFP, Washington

US President Joe Biden said Friday that his predecessor Donald Trump, who is awaiting a Senate impeachment trial on charges of inciting an attack on the US Capitol, should not receive classified intelligence briefings, as is customary for former presidents.

"I just think that there is no need for him to have the intelligence briefings. What value is giving him an intelligence briefing? What impact does he have at all, other than the fact he might slip and say something?" Biden said in an interview with the CBS Evening News.

The new Democratic leader cited Trump's "erratic behavior unrelated to the insurrection" of January 6, when he is accused of encouraging his supporters to smash their way into Congress to prevent lawmakers from certifying Biden's election victory.

Trump insisted that the election had been stolen from him, despite overwhelming evidence that it had not, and despite losing dozens of legal challenges to Biden's win.

While in the White House, Trump repeatedly triggered concern over his use or dismissal of intelligence.

Former presidents are traditionally entitled to intelligence briefings, but many Trump critics have voiced fears that he is a loose cannon who may let slip information vital to national security.



A farmer shouts slogans as they take part in a three-hour "chakka jam" or road blockade, as part of protests against farm laws on a highway on the outskirts of New Delhi, India, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Tractors, trucks block India's roads as farm protests widen

UN urges maximum restraints from govt, protesters

REUTERS, Kundli

Thousands of farmers across India blocked roads yesterday with makeshift tents, tractors, trucks and boulders to pressure the government to roll back agricultural reforms that have triggered months-long protests.

While the initial protests were started by rice and wheat growers from northern Indian who camped out on the outskirts of New Delhi, support for them has been growing especially in states not ruled by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's party.

The federal government has offered concessions to the farmers but refuses to repeal three laws passed last year that it says are crucial to bring new investment to the sector, which accounts for nearly 15% of India's \$2.9 trillion economy and about half its workforce.

But farmers fear the reforms will leave them at the mercy of big corporate buyers, gradually ending the current practice of assured government purchases mainly for grain such as wheat and rice.

Yesterday's three-hour "chakka jam", or road blockade, started around noon except

in New Delhi and a couple of neighbouring states. Farmers squatted on the road in the eastern state of Odisha and Karnataka in the south with flags and banners protesting against the laws, with some carrying placards urging the government not to treat them as enemies.

The protests have mostly been peaceful but a tractor rally on Jan. 26 flared into turmoil as some farmers clashed with police.

Since then, authorities have shut down the mobile internet in parts of the national capital and heavily barricaded border roads to prevent protesters from coming into the city again.

"The rights to peaceful assembly & expression should be protected both offline & online," the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights said on Twitter, calling on authorities and protesters to exercise "maximum restraint."

The issue has also caught international attention with celebrities such as pop star Rihanna and environment campaigner Greta Thunberg announcing their support for the farmers. The United States has also urged India to resume talks with farmers.

'Playing with fire'

Twitter's India snub sparks debate on compliance, free speech

REUTERS, New Delhi

Twitter Inc's refusal to comply with an Indian government directive to block more than 250 accounts and posts has put the social media giant at the centre of a political firestorm in one of its key markets.

Government officials, business people and ordinary netizens are split over free speech and the US company's compliance practices, in a controversy that comes soon after Twitter's top lobbyist in India resigned.

The showdown, after the firm this week "declined to abide (by) and obey" the order to remove posts and accounts that the government said risked inciting violence, is the latest instance of worsening relationships between Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration and US social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp.

For Twitter, the stakes are high in a country of 1.3 billion where it has millions of users and is ardently used by Modi, his cabinet ministers and other leaders to communicate with the public.

Farmers are conducting a growing protest

against new agriculture laws, with tens of thousands camping out on the outskirts of New Delhi. As the prolonged crisis escalated, the government this week sought an "emergency blocking" of the "provocative" Twitter hashtag "#ModiPlanningFarmerGenocide" and dozens of accounts.

Twitter initially complied but later restored most of the accounts, citing "insufficient justification" to continue the suspensions. The technology ministry warned the company, in a letter seen by Reuters, of legal "consequences" that could include fines or jail, saying the government was not required to justify its demand to ban accounts.

Free speech activists say the government should not attempt to use legal provisions to muzzle freedom of expression, while others argue Twitter should comply or go to court.

"Twitter is playing with fire," said an Indian social media executive who was surprised by the company's non-compliance. "If there is a legal request, you are required to take down content. You are free to challenge it" in court.

In 2019, a parliamentary panel headed by

a lawmaker from BJP warned Twitter after CEO Jack Dorsey failed to appear before the committee. This week, Dorsey became a talking point on Indian TV news after he liked a tweet suggesting the company should consider introducing a farmer protest emoji.

Meenakashi Lekhi, a lawmaker from Modi's party who heads a parliamentary panel on data privacy, criticised Twitter for disobeying government orders, adding she has yet to decide whether to summon company executives.

"Twitter needs to understand they are not lawmakers," Lekhi told Reuters. "It is not their policy which will work, it is the policy of the state, country which will work."

Calling the showdown "inevitable", the Hindu newspaper said in a Friday editorial: "Provocative posts have no place on any platform, (but) free speech should not be hit."

Prasanth Sugathan of Software Freedom Law Center India, said, "The selective government approach to ask social media companies to ban content when it doesn't suit the official narrative is problematic. It stifles free speech and press freedom."



People ride motorbikes through a flooded road with red water in Pekalongan, Central Java province, Indonesia, yesterday. A surreal, blood-red river inundated the Indonesian village of Jenggot after floods hit a nearby batik factory causing a frenzy on social media. Pekalongan is a city known for manufacturing batik, a traditional Indonesian method of using wax to resist water-based dyes to depict patterns and drawings, usually on fabric.

PHOTO: REUTERS