

Biden presses Xi on HK, Xinjiang

AFP, Washington

Joe Biden challenged Chinese leader Xi Jinping on human rights, trade and regional muscle-flexing, in their first call since the new US president took office.

An increasingly assertive Beijing has tested US patience since Xi came to power, and under former president Donald Trump found itself on the receiving end of trade tariffs as relations frayed. Biden is under pressure at home and abroad to maintain the stance that Trump adopted.

His call on Wednesday was about setting the tone for the relationship, at a time when many in the US and the wider world blame China for failing to contain the coronavirus pandemic, which was first discovered in Wuhan.

Biden "underscored his fundamental concerns about Beijing's coercive and unfair economic practices, crackdown in Hong Kong, human rights abuses in Xinjiang, and increasingly assertive actions in the region, including toward Taiwan," the White House said after the call.

Washington and its Asian allies have bristled at China's expansion in the South China Sea, a huge and economically vital waterway where Beijing has built militarized islands, despite multiple overlapping claims from neighbouring states.

The US has repeatedly sailed warships through the area to press the point that the sea is globally recognized as international waters.

The two leaders also spoke about the Covid-19 pandemic, climate change and weapons proliferation, the White House said.

Chinese state media reported simply that the two sides "exchanged in-depth views on bilateral relations and major international and regional issues."



People wearing costumes march with placards in a protest against the military coup and to demand the release of elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi, in the ancient city of Bagan, Myanmar, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

NEWS IN BRIEF

India warns US social media firms after row with Twitter

India's technology minister Ravi Shankar Prasad yesterday warned US social media firms to abide by the country's laws, a day after a face-off between Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration and Twitter over content regulation. Speaking in Parliament, IT minister Ravi Shankar Prasad called out Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and WhatsApp by name and said they were welcome to operate in India, but only if they play by India's rules. "You will have to follow the Constitution of India, you will have to abide by the laws of India," said Prasad. India rebuked Twitter on Wednesday after the US social media giant refused to fully comply with a government order to take down over 1,100 accounts and posts which New Delhi claims spread misinformation about the farmer protests against new agriculture reforms.

Saudi woman activist freed after nearly 3 years in jail

Saudi authorities on Wednesday released prominent women's rights activist Loujain al-Hathloul after nearly three years in detention, her family said, as the kingdom comes under renewed US pressure over its human rights record. Hathloul, 31, was arrested in May 2018 with about a dozen other women activists just weeks before the historic lifting of a decades-long ban on female drivers, a reform they had long campaigned for, triggering a torrent of international criticism. The release of the activist, who is still under probation and is barred from leaving Saudi Arabia, sparked euphoria among her siblings who had launched a vigorous campaign overseas for her freedom in a major embarrassment for the kingdom's rulers. US President Joe Biden, who has pledged to intensify scrutiny of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's human rights record, welcomed the decision to release her, saying it was "the right thing to do".

Qaeda's Yemen leader appears in video after UN arrest report

The leader of al-Qaeda's branch in Yemen appears to be still at large despite a United Nations report which claimed he had been under arrest for months, the SITE Intelligence Group and two local tribal leaders said yesterday after he was seen in a video released by the jihadist group. Khalid Batafari, who has been the leader of Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) for about a year, talks about the storming of the US Congress last month in the video, which came out Wednesday. In the 20-minute video titled "America and the Painful Seizure", Batafari says "storming the Congress is only the tip of the iceberg of what will come to them, God willing". A report filed to the UN Security Council last week claimed Batafari was arrested and his deputy, Saad Atef al-Awlaqi, killed during an "operation in Ghayda City, Al-Mahrah governorate, in October".

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

Trump was riot 'inciter-in-chief'

Say prosecutors at Senate as they eye to wrap up case against him; some Republicans in talks to form anti-Trump third party

AGENCIES

Impeachment prosecutors are expected to wrap up their case against ex-president Donald Trump in the US Senate yesterday, backed by chilling footage that showed senior politicians fleeing for their lives during last month's assault on Congress.

The Democratic impeachment managers will argue for a second day that the riot was deliberately incited by the former president, with an aim of reminding senators, and watching Americans, just how bad things got on January 6.

On Wednesday they walked senators -- many of them clearly shaken -- through hours of graphic presentations and video, some of which came from security cameras and police bodycams and was being aired for the first time.

The ensuing mayhem left five people dead, including one woman shot after she invaded the Capitol and one policeman

killed by the crowd.

The episode occurred after Trump told a rally near the White House that his failure to win reelection was due to vote rigging, but Trump's defense lawyers, who will present their arguments later this week, say Trump cannot be personally blamed for the riot and that the entire trial is unconstitutional because he has already left office.

SECOND IMPEACHMENT TRIAL

The impeachment managers laid out their case over several hours arguing that the links are clear between Trump, his lies about election fraud, the violence, and the then president's inaction as the riot unfolded.

Lead impeachment manager Jamie Raskin said Trump "completely abdicated" his duty. "Donald Trump surrendered

his role as commander-in-chief and became the inciter-in-chief of a dangerous insurrection," Raskin said.

A two-thirds majority, meaning 17 Republicans would need to go along with the 50 Democrats, to convict Trump.

Unlike Trump's first impeachment trial a year ago, which took three weeks, this one is expected to be over within days.

Meanwhile Reuters reported that dozens of former Republican officials, who view the party as unwilling to stand up to Trump and his attempts to undermine US democracy, are in talks to form a center-right breakaway party, four people involved in the discussions told Reuters.

More than 120 of them held a Zoom call last Friday, Reuters report said. The plan would be to run candidates in some races but also to endorse center-right candidates in others, be they Republicans, independents or Democrats, it added.

Show restraint

Moscow tells Tehran as IAEA says Iran producing uranium metal

AFP, Moscow

Russia yesterday urged Iran to show restraint after it started producing uranium metal in a new breach of limits laid out in Tehran's nuclear deal with world powers.

"We understand the logic of their actions and the reasons prompting Iran. Despite this it is necessary to show restraint and a responsible approach," Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov told state news agency RIA Novosti.

The Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said Wednesday that it had verified the production of 3.6 grammes of uranium metal at a plant in Iran.

The landmark deal -- reached in 2015 by the United States, China, Russia, Germany, France and Britain -- contained a 15-year ban on "producing or acquiring plutonium or uranium metals or their alloys".

Iran said last month it was researching uranium metal production, a sensitive issue because uranium metal can be used as a component in nuclear weapons.

Ryabkov said Iran's move demonstrated Tehran's "determination not to put up with the current situation," after it warned that time was running out for US President Joe Biden's administration to save the agreement.



Police officers wield their batons against activists from various student unions during a protest march demanding jobs and better education facilities, in Kolkata, India, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Europe still 'vulnerable'

Says WHO's Europe director despite falling number of Covid cases

AFP, Copenhagen

The World Health Organization yesterday warned of a "false sense of security" in Europe, saying most of the continent's nations were still vulnerable despite a fall in Covid cases.

WHO Europe director Hans Kluge told a press conference that "the decline in cases conceals increasing numbers of outbreaks and community spread involving variants of concern."

More than a million cases are registered every week across the 53 member states in the UN agency's European region, which includes several in central Asia.

But the number of reported cases has been falling over the past four weeks and deaths have also been declining over the past two weeks.

"At this point, the overwhelming majority of European countries remain vulnerable," Kluge said, adding that as of now there is "a thin line between the hope of a vaccine and a false sense of security."

The number of vaccine doses

administered in Europe now stands 41 million, greater than the nearly 36 million cases recorded since the start of the pandemic.

According to data from 29 out of the 37 countries that have begun



vaccinations, 7.8 million have received both doses of the vaccines, Kluge said, warning that the number only accounts for 1.5 percent of the population in those countries.

"Vaccines are essential, but as of now, they are not sufficient to control the pandemic," Kluge said.

The regional WHO director cautioned against "rash decisions" for countries contemplating easing restrictions.

"Time and again have we seen countries reopen too fast and lose hard-earned gains," Kluge said.

With the emergence of new variants, vaccinations could also be undermined if the virus is allowed to circulate, potentially causing mutations that "may influence vaccine efficacy."

"Unless we halt transmission now, the expected benefits from vaccinations in controlling this pandemic may not be evident," Kluge said.

The WHO director also reiterated a call for an equitable distribution of vaccines to include poorer countries, both citing it as a "moral imperative," but also as a means to mitigate risks.

"Unfair access to vaccines, can backfire. The longer the virus lingers, the greater the risk of dangerous mutations," Kluge said.

Across the WHO's European region, 38 countries have recorded cases linked to the variant first discovered in Britain and 19 nations have recorded cases from variant discovered in South Africa.

French nun turns 117 defeating Covid-19

AFP, Toulon

Europe's oldest person, French nun Sister Andre, turned 117 yesterday after surviving Covid-19 last month and living through two world wars, with a special birthday feast including her favourite dessert -- baked Alaska.

Born Lucile Randon on February 11, 1904, Sister Andre said she didn't realise she had caught the coronavirus, which infected 81 residents of her retirement home in the southeast city of Toulon, killing 10 of them.

"I'm told that I got it," the nun told AFP on Wednesday at the home, where she sat basking in the winter sun, her eyes closed and hands clasped in prayer.

"I was very tired, it's true, but I didn't realise it," she added in a steady, strong voice that belies her years.

Sister Andre, who has been inundated with calls from reporters around the world, said she was not planning to do anything special for her 117th birthday.

But the home has other ideas, with a celebration to include a video call with her family.

She says her favourite food is lobster and she enjoys "a small glass of wine



every day".

Born in the southern town of Ales in a Protestant family, she grew up as the only girl among three brothers. One of her fondest memories was the return of two of her brothers at the end of World War I.

"It was rare, in families, there were usually two dead rather than two alive. They both came back," she told AFP last year, on her 116th birthday.

As a young woman she worked as a governess to children of wealthy families in Paris.

She is the second-oldest living person in the world, according to the Gerontology Research Group, after Japanese woman Kane Tanaka, who is 118.

Asked what she would say to young people, Sister Andre said, hands clasped in prayer, "Be brave and show compassion."

TWITTER PERMANENTLY SHUTS DOOR FOR TRUMP

AFP, Washington

Twitter will not allow former president Donald Trump back on the platform even if he runs for office again, the company's chief financial officer said Wednesday.

"The way our policies work, when you're removed from the platform, you're removed from the platform, whether you're a commentator, a CFO or a current or former public official," Ned Segal said in an interview with television network CNBC.

Trump's "de-platforming" by Twitter came after a violent uprising by his supporters leading to a deadly siege at the US Capitol on January 6. Facebook and other social networks also banned Trump after the incident.

"Our policies are designed to ensure that people are not inciting violence," Segal said.

"And if anybody does that we would have to remove them from the service and our policies don't allow people to come back."

Trump was a prolific user of Twitter during his campaign and in his four years at the White House, using the platform for policy announcements, to settle scores and for his political campaign. He had more than 80 million followers.

The social media policy has been welcomed by some but also faced scrutiny from others who say the banning is against freedom of speech. They have also raised questions whether social media can take such decisions.

All coronavirus in the world would fit in a coke can

REUTERS, London

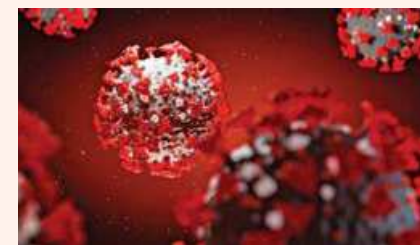
All the Covid-causing virus circulating in the world right now could easily fit inside a single cola can, according to a calculation by a British mathematician whose sum exposes just how much devastation is caused by minuscule viral particles.

Using global rates of new infections with the pandemic disease, coupled with estimations of viral load, Bath University maths expert Kit Yates worked out there are around two quintillion - or two billion billion - SARS-CoV-2 virus particles in the world at any one time.

Detailing the steps in his calculations, Yates said he used the diameter of SARS-CoV-2 - at an average of about 100 nanometers, or 100 billionths of a meter - and then figured out the volume of the spherical virus.

Even accounting for the coronavirus' projecting spike proteins and the fact that the spherical particles will leave gaps when stacked together, the total is still less than in a single 330 millilitre (ml) cola can, he said.

"It's astonishing to think that all the trouble, the disruption, the hardship and the loss of life that has resulted over



the last year could constitute just a few mouthfuls," Yates said in a statement.

More than 2.3 million people have died in the Covid-19 pandemic so far, and there have been almost 107 million confirmed cases worldwide.

Based on latest reports, the countries with the most new deaths were the United States with 3,266 new deaths, followed by Brazil with 1,330 and Mexico with 1,328. The United States is the worst-affected country with 471,575 deaths from 27,287,341 cases.

After the US, the hardest-hit countries are Brazil with 234,850 deaths from 9,659,167 cases, Mexico with 169,760 deaths from 1,957,889 cases, India with 155,360 deaths from 10,871,294 cases, and the United Kingdom with 114,851 deaths from 3,985,161 cases.