

ANTI-COUP PROTESTS IN MYANMAR

Anger simmers over 'kidnapping at night'

REUTERS

Opponents of Myanmar's military coup sustained mass protests for an eighth straight day yesterday as continuing arrests of junta critics added to anger over the detention of elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Thousands marched in the business hub, Yangon, while protesters took to the streets of the capital Naypyitaw, the second city Mandalay and other towns a day after the biggest protests so far in the Southeast Asian country.

"Stop kidnapping at night," was among the signs held up by protesters in Yangon in response to arrest raids in recent days.

The United Nations human rights office said on Friday more than 350 people, including officials, activists and monks, have been arrested in Myanmar since the Feb. 1 coup, including some who face criminal charges on "dubious grounds".

Anger in Myanmar has been fuelled by videos showing more arrests of government critics - including a doctor who was part of the civil disobedience movement. Some arrests have taken place during the hours of darkness.

Internet memes captioned "Our nights aren't safe anymore" and "Myanmar military is kidnapping people at night" have circulated widely on social media.

The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, a watchdog group for political prisoners, voiced concern.

The army said it had seized power because of alleged fraud in a November election that Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party had won in a landslide. The army's complaints were dismissed by Myanmar's electoral commission.

The coup halted a tentative transition to democracy that began in 2011 after nearly half a century of isolation and stagnation under military juntas.

Suu Kyi faces charges of illegally importing and using six walkie-talkie radios found in a search of her house. NLD press officer Kyi Toe said on Facebook that there were eight people living at her home and she was healthy.

The 47-member UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution on Friday calling on Myanmar to release Suu Kyi and other officials from detention and refrain from using violence on protesters.

Thomas Andrews, the UN rights investigator for Myanmar, told a special session of the rights council in Geneva that the UN Security Council should consider imposing sanctions and arms embargoes.

The United States this week began imposing sanctions on the ruling generals and some businesses linked to them.



This aerial photo shows protesters marching on a road during a demonstration against the military coup in Shwebo in Myanmar's Sagaing Region, yesterday. Inset, Demonstrators hold signs protesting the coup in Yangon.

PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS

'There was no insurrection'

Trump's lawyers deny his role in provoking rioters; Senate readies for verdict

AGENCIES

Donald Trump's lawyers said on Friday Democrats had provided no evidence the former president incited last month's deadly US Capitol riot and had used his second impeachment trial to settle political scores.

Trump is on trial in the US Senate on a charge of inciting the Jan. 6 insurrection by supporters who stormed the seat of Congress in Washington to stop lawmakers from certifying Democratic President Joe Biden's election victory, resulting in the deaths of five people, including a police officer.

Trump's lawyers argued that his remarks, including a fiery speech that day urging supporters to "fight like hell" to stop the certification, were protected by the First Amendment of the US Constitution, which ensures the right to free speech.

"To claim that the president in any way wished, desired or encouraged lawless or violent behavior is a preposterous and monstrous lie," said Michael van der Veen, one of Trump's lawyers.

"Clearly, there was no insurrection," attorney Bruce Castor told the Senate jurors.

Trump's defense team also portrayed the impeachment trial as little more than the result of a political witch hunt by Democrats who had been trying to get Trump for four years.

A final up-or-down vote to convict could come as soon as Saturday.

IMPEACHMENT TRIAL

In arguments this week, Democratic members of the House of Representatives showed videos and shared tweets they said made clear Trump had set the stage for the violence by falsely claiming the election results were fraudulent and egging on his supporters with his rhetoric long before Jan. 6. They said he summoned the mob to Washington, gave the crowd its marching orders and did nothing to stop the violence as it played out on television. His one request to act peacefully did not absolve him, they said.

The Democrats are unlikely to gain a conviction, as few Republican senators have come out against Trump, who remains popular among Republican voters.

The Democratic-controlled House impeached Trump on Jan. 13. Conviction in the 100-member Senate requires a two-thirds majority, which means at least 17 Republicans would have to join Democrats.

If Trump is acquitted, the Senate could decide to censure him or even vote to bar him from holding public office again. Asked on Thursday about pursuing the latter option, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said that decision would have to wait until the end of the trial.

Senator John Thune, the No. 2 Republican in the chamber, indicated that a censure motion could be in the cards.

Trump is the first US president to be impeached twice and the first to face trial after leaving office. His first impeachment trial, which stemmed from his efforts to pressure Ukraine to investigate Biden, ended in an acquittal a year ago in what was then a Republican-controlled Senate.

'He let us down'

Nikki Haley says Trump has no future in the GOP

CNN ONLINE

Former US ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley directly criticized former President Donald Trump for his involvement stoking the US Capitol riot in a new interview, a notable condemnation from someone who is widely viewed as harboring presidential hopes in a party that is still in thrall to Trump.

"We need to acknowledge he let us down," she told Politico magazine in an interview published Friday. "He went down a path he shouldn't have, and we shouldn't have followed him, and we shouldn't have listened to him. And we can't let that ever happen again."

Haley has often attempted to walk a fine line between allying herself with Trump -- who remains a hugely popular figure within the party -- while distancing herself enough to appeal to his Republican and moderate critics.

She did, however, say that she believes "impeachment is a waste of time."

The Senate could also consider a vote of whether to bar Trump from serving in public office. Haley, however, predicted that Trump won't run for federal office again and that the he will not have a future in the Republican Party.

"I don't think he's going to be in the picture," she said. "I don't think he can. He's fallen so far."



A pro-democracy protester confronts a line of riot police during an anti-government demonstration next to the Grand Palace in Bangkok, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

China refused to provide raw data on early cases

Says WHO member after Tedros says all Covid origins hypotheses still open

REUTERS, Geneva

China refused to give raw data on early Covid-19 cases to a World Health Organization-led team probing the origins of the pandemic, one of the team's investigators said, potentially complicating efforts to understand how the outbreak began.

The team had requested raw patient data on the 174 cases of COVID-19 that China had identified from the early phase of the outbreak in the Chinese city of Wuhan in December 2019, as well as other cases, but were only provided with a summary, said Dominic Dwyer, an Australian infectious diseases expert who is a member of the team.

Such raw data is known as "line listings", he said, and would typically be anonymised but contain details such as what questions were asked of individual patients, their responses and how their responses were analysed. He said that gaining access to the raw data was especially important since only half of the 174 cases had exposure to the Huanan market in Wuhan, where the virus was initially detected.

While the Chinese authorities provided a lot of material, he said the issue of access to the raw patient data would be mentioned in the team's final report. A summary of the team's findings could be released as early as next week, the WHO said on Friday.

On Friday, WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said that all hypotheses on the origins of the Covid-19 pandemic remained on the table following the WHO's investigation in China.

The mission to Wuhan, where the first cases were spotted, failed to identify the source of the virus but poured cold water on the theory that it leaked from a virology laboratory in the Chinese city.

UK lawyer wins daunting job of ICC prosecutor

AFP, United Nations

British human rights lawyer Karim Khan was elected Friday as the new prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, a politically daunting position whose incumbent was slapped with US sanctions.

Khan, 50, previously led a special UN probe into crimes by the Islamic State extremist group in which he pressed for a trial on the lines of Nuremberg for Nazi war criminals.

More controversially, he also represented late Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi's son Seif al-Islam.

Khan will be only the third prosecutor of the ICC, taking over in June from Gambian-born Fatou Bensouda, who has outraged Washington through her investigations into the Afghanistan war and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

ICC nations failed to reach a consensus choice, triggering a vote in New York among four candidates in which Khan won on the second ballot with 72 votes.



Mario Draghi sworn in as Italy's new PM

AFP, Rome

Former European Central Bank chief Mario Draghi was formally sworn in as Italy's new prime minister yesterday, against the backdrop of the deadly coronavirus pandemic and a crippling recession.

The appointment of the 73-year-old known as "Super Mario" capped weeks of political instability for the country still in the grips of the health crisis that has killed more than 93,000 people.

Draghi was parachuted in by Mattarella after the previous centre-left coalition under premier Giuseppe Conte collapsed, leading Italy rudderless at a critical time.

He spent the last 10 days assembling a broad-based coalition and on Friday night formally accepted the post of premier in a meeting with Mattarella, after which he publicly revealed the new cabinet for the first time.

On Wednesday, Draghi will be presented to the Senate, the upper house of parliament, followed by the lower Chamber of Deputies on Thursday for a confidence vote that will give the final official blessing to his government.

"Break a leg," read the headline on La Stampa daily Saturday, as an Ipsos poll in the Corriere della Sera daily showed that 62 percent of Italians supported Draghi.

Draghi has the support of a rainbow coalition ranging from leftists to Matteo Salvini's far-right League.

Biden wants to close prison at Guantanamo Bay

US to bring in asylum seekers forced to wait in Mexico

AFP, Washington

US President Joe Biden wants to close the Guantanamo Bay prison for terror suspects before the end of his term, the White House said Friday, echoing an unfulfilled campaign promise from Barack Obama's administration.

Asked at a press conference about a possible closure of the prison in Cuba during Biden's tenure, spokeswoman Jen Psaki said, "That certainly is our goal and our intention."

The military prison accommodates inmates linked to the US "war on terror" including Pakistani Khaled Sheikh Mohammed, the self-proclaimed mastermind of the September 11, 2001 attacks.

It still houses around 40 detainees, 26 of whom are considered too dangerous to be released, but legal proceedings drag on due to the complexity of their cases.

After 9/11, the US Army, under the presidency of George W Bush, quickly built the detention center on a naval base



belonging to the United States at the eastern tip of Cuba, on a small enclave ceded by Cuba to the United States in 1903, to thank its powerful neighbor for its help in the war against the Spaniards.

Meanwhile, asylum seekers forced to remain in Mexico while their cases are being resolved in the United States will begin to be admitted into the US as of next week, Biden's administration announced Friday.

At least 70,000 people were returned to Mexico under the agreement from January 2019, when the program began to be implemented, through December 2020.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS