

NEWS IN BRIEF

Afghan govt, Taliban agree to accelerate peace talks

The Afghan government and the Taliban yesterday agreed to try to accelerate peace talks, at a meeting in Moscow that followed an international conference there on the peace process, Afghanistan's top peace official and a Taliban spokesman said. The United States, Russia, China and Pakistan called on Afghanistan's warring sides to reach an immediate ceasefire at the conference, held in Russia just six weeks before a deadline agreed last year to withdraw US troops. Moscow hosted the international conference on Afghanistan on Thursday, at which the nations involved issued a joint statement calling on the Afghan sides to reach a peace deal and curb violence, and on the Taliban not to launch any offensives in the spring. They also said they "did not support the restoration of the Islamic Emirate."

Crucial UN biodiversity summit set for October

The United Nations' biodiversity summit, COP15, will take place in October in the Chinese city of Kunming after being delayed a year due to the pandemic, the UN said yesterday. The meeting is seen as a vital chance for nations to set guidelines for protecting nature and slowing the catastrophic pace of species loss. The UN said the summit would be held October 11-24, just a few weeks before a parallel UN conference on climate change, COP26, takes place in Glasgow. A preliminary biodiversity session will be held in August, it said, although a location is yet to be announced. Since 1970, wild animal populations of birds and fish have declined by nearly 70 percent, according to a WWF assessment. The UN said in September that nations had missed every one of the 20 ten-year targets to halt biodiversity loss they set themselves in 2010.

ICC gives Israel month to ask for war crimes probe delay



The International Criminal Court has given Israel and the Palestinians one month to ask the tribunal to postpone its war crimes investigation, provided they can prove they are carrying out their own probes. The ICC's chief prosecutor announced on March 3 that she had opened a full investigation into the situation in the Israeli-occupied territories -- infuriating Israel, which is not a member of the Hague-based court. A deferral notice was sent on March 9 to all member states of the ICC, including all states that would normally exercise jurisdiction -- including Israel and Palestine, "an official in the prosecutor's office told AFP yesterday. The notice, sent under Article 18 of the court's founding document, the Rome Statute, gives countries a month to tell judges they are investigating crimes similar to those being probed by the ICC. The probe will mainly focus on the 2014 Gaza War but also look at the deaths of Palestinian demonstrators from 2018 onwards.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS



A Palestinian demonstrator argues with Israeli troops during a protest against Israeli settlements, in Yatta in the Israeli-occupied West Bank yesterday. A Palestinian was shot dead by Israeli soldiers when clashes erupted during a demonstration in the Israeli-occupied West Bank yesterday, the Palestinian health ministry said. Palestinians gather on Fridays across the West Bank to protest against the expansion of Israeli settlements, which are deemed illegal under international law.

PHOTO: REUTERS

US, Chinese diplomats clash in Alaska meet

REUTERS, Anchorage

The first high-level US-China meeting of the Biden administration got off to a fiery start on Thursday, with both sides leveling sharp rebukes of the others' policies in a rare public display that underscored the level of bilateral tension.

The run-up to the talks in Anchorage, Alaska, which followed visits by US officials to allies Japan and South Korea, was marked by a flurry of moves by Washington that showed it was taking a tough stance, and by blunt talk from Beijing.

"We will ... discuss our deep concerns with actions by China, including in Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Taiwan, cyber attacks on the United States, economic coercion of our allies," US Secretary of State Antony Blinken told his Chinese counterparts in a highly unusual extended back-and-forth in front of cameras.

"Each of these actions threaten the rules-based order that maintains global stability," he said.

China's top diplomat Yang Jiechi responded with a 15-minute speech in Chinese while the US side awaited translation, lashing out over what he said was the United States' struggling democracy, poor treatment of minorities, and criticizing its foreign and trade policies.

"The United States uses its military force and financial hegemony to carry out long-arm jurisdiction and suppress other countries," said Yang. "It abuses so-called notions of national security to obstruct normal trade exchanges, and incite some countries to attack China," he added.

What is typically a few minutes of opening



US says China threatens rule-based order, global stability

China says US abuses national security

remarks in front of journalists for such high-level meetings lasted more than an hour, and the two delegations tussled about when media would be ushered out of the room.

Afterwards, the United States accused China of "grandstanding" while Chinese state media blamed US officials for speaking too long and being "inhospitable".

Both sides accused the other of violating diplomatic protocol by speaking too long in opening remarks.

Adding to tensions, China on Friday tried a Canadian citizen on espionage charges, in a case embroiled in a wider diplomatic spat between Washington and Beijing.



A government employee gives pizza to asylum-seeking migrants from Central America, who were airlifted from McAllen to El Paso, Texas, and deported from the US, inside the office of the Center for Integral Attention to Migrants (CAIM) in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico on Thursday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Austin visits India with China high on agenda

AFP, New Delhi

Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin yesterday arrived in India for the first face-to-face meetings between New Delhi and the Biden administration, with shared alarm about China set to figure highly.

India is a key US ally in the region and the visit comes hot on the heels of frosty first talks between Secretary of State Antony Blinken with top Chinese officials in Alaska.

Prior to that, Austin and Blinken visited Japan and South Korea.

The two-day visit to New Delhi will see Austin meet PM Narendra Modi, a senior US official said, as well as Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and Ajit Doval, a national security adviser.

As well as deadly clashes on the border, Beijing has irked New Delhi with its support for arch-rival Pakistan, as have Chinese investments in Indian Ocean nations such as Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Nepal. India and China have also engaged in a tussle of "vaccine diplomacy", competing to supply other countries with coronavirus shots to secure goodwill and influence.

In 2016, the United States designated India as a "Major Defense Partner", and they have since signed a string of deals easing the transfer of advanced weaponry and deepening military cooperation.

'It is time to bury the past' with India: Pak army chief calls for peaceful resolution of Kashmir issue

AGENCIES

Pakistan's powerful army chief has called on arch rivals India and Pakistan to "bury the past" and move towards cooperation, an overture towards New Delhi that follows an unexpected joint ceasefire announcement last month between the two countries' militaries.

General Qamar Javed Bajwa stressed however that the burden was on India to create a "conducive environment" and said the United States had a role to play in ending regional conflicts.

"We feel it is time to bury the past and move forward," Bajwa said on Thursday while addressing a gathering of scholars and experts discussing national security issues at a seminar in the capital, Islamabad.

"But ... our neighbour (India) will have to create a conducive environment, particularly in Indian-occupied Kashmir," he said, referring to the part of the Himalayan territory India administers.

Unsettled disputes between the two South Asian nuclear rivals are "dragging

this region back to the swamp of poverty and underdevelopment," said Bajwa at the conference meant to highlight the Pakistani government's new security policies.

There was no immediate comment from India.

Pakistan's powerful army has ruled the country for nearly half of its 73-year existence, and the military has long controlled foreign and security policies.

Kashmir is split between Pakistan and India but claimed by both in its entirety. The two countries have fought two of their three wars over Kashmir since gaining independence from Britain in 1947.

Relations deteriorated in 2019 after New Delhi stripped its part of Kashmir of the special status.

Bajwa said the economic potential of South and Central Asia had "forever remained hostage" to the India-Pakistan disputes. "It is important to understand that without the resolution of the Kashmir dispute through peaceful means, the process of sub-continental rapprochement will always remain susceptible to derailment," he said.



US House passes bill to protect 'Dreamers'

REUTERS, Washington

The US House of Representatives on Thursday passed bills providing a pathway to citizenship for immigrants nicknamed "Dreamers," who are living illegally in the United States after entering as children, as well as for a large number of immigrant farmworkers.

The two measures now go to the deeply divided Senate where they face a difficult climb.

By a vote of 228-197, the Democratic-controlled House passed the Dreamers bill with only nine Republicans supporting it.

The legislation would allow Dreamers to live, work, serve in the military and continue their educations without the threat of deportation and to eventually win US citizenship if they meet a set of requirements.

The House then approved the farmworker bill, 247-174, to shield about 1 million immigrant laborers, many of whom have been in the United States for decades, from deportation.

Both measures are among several attempts by Democrats to reverse former President Donald Trump's hard-line immigration policies.

Dreamers, numbering around 1.8 million young immigrants, made the dangerous journey on their own, with parents or hired hands, often to escape gang violence in Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador and other countries.



Finland: world's happiest country

AFP, Helsinki

Covid-19 has done little to alter the ranking of the world's happiest countries, with Finland at the top for a fourth year running, an annual UN-sponsored report said yesterday.

The researchers behind the World Happiness Report, now in its ninth year, used Gallup data asking people in 149 countries to rate their own happiness, also taking into account measures such as GDP, social support, personal freedom and levels of corruption to give each nation a happiness score, which is an average of the past three years.

Once again, the top spots were dominated by European countries -- with Denmark coming second, followed by Switzerland, Iceland and the Netherlands.

New Zealand, falling one place to ninth, was again the only non-European nation in the top ten.

Other climbers included Germany, up from 17th to 13th, and France, rising two to 21st. The UK, meanwhile, fell from 13th to 17th place, while the US fell one spot to 19th.

African nations Lesotho, Botswana, Rwanda and Zimbabwe came at the bottom of the table, but ahead of Afghanistan which was classed as the world's unhappiest nation this year.

The authors also compared this year's data to previous years' averages to gauge the impact of the pandemic, and found "significantly higher frequency of negative emotions" in just over a third of the countries. But, surprisingly, positive emotions increased in 22 countries.

Author Jeffrey Sachs meanwhile warned that "we need urgently to learn from Covid-19," adding that "we must aim for wellbeing rather than mere wealth."

Finland's top spot in the happiness list has previously been met with raised eyebrows in the country whose population of 5.5 million is said to shy away from spontaneous demonstrations of joy, valuing instead the quiet and solitude of the country's vast forests and thousands of lakes.

The northern country's long dark winters were reputed to be behind high levels of alcoholism and suicide, but a decade-long public health drive has helped cut rates by more than half.

Finland's residents enjoy a high quality of life, security and public services, with rates of inequality and poverty among the lowest of all OECD countries.

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