

MIGRANT SURGE AT US-MEXICO BORDER

Biden steps up family expulsions

REUTERS, Ciudad Juarez

The United States is expelling migrants to Mexico far from where they are caught crossing the border, according to Reuters witnesses, in a move that circumvents the refusal of authorities in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas who stopped accepting the return of migrant families with younger children.

The practice is a sign that President Joe Biden is toughening his approach to the growing humanitarian crisis on the US-Mexican border after his administration's entreaties for Central American migrants to stay home have failed to stop thousands from heading north.

Some families caught at the border in Texas' Rio Grande Valley said in interviews they were flown to El Paso, Texas, after being held in custody just a few days. From there, they were escorted by US officials to the international bridge to Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, around 1,300 km away from where they were first picked up by US border patrol agents.

A Reuters photographer saw planes landing in El Paso this week that were loaded with dozens of migrant families with young children, including babies in diapers, and then saw the same families crossing the international bridge.

Some passengers interviewed by Reuters once they crossed into Mexico said they had been awakened in their holding cells at night by border agents and not told where they were going as they were loaded on buses and taken to the airport.

Landon Hutchens, a US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) spokesman, said that due to a lack of capacity in the Rio Grande Valley, migrants have been sent to El Paso for processing, as well as Laredo, Texas, and San Diego, California.



Police officers stand in line as demonstrators protest against the government's coronavirus disease restrictions in Kassel, Germany, yesterday. Countries in Europe, Asia and South America yesterday introduced new lockdown measures and restrictions to fight a surge in coronavirus infections.

PHOTO: REUTERS

NEWS IN BRIEF

Japan lifts tsunami advisory after strong quake

Japan's meteorological agency lifted a tsunami advisory around an hour after a strong 7.2-magnitude earthquake struck off the country's northeastern coast yesterday, causing no immediate damage or injuries. The quake hit at 6:09 pm (0909 GMT) in Pacific waters off Miyagi region with a depth of 60 kilometres (37 miles), the JMA said, issuing an advisory for tsunami waves of around one metre. Local utilities and the nation's nuclear authority said the region's nuclear plants did not show any abnormalities after the latest quake, although local railway firms suspended services, including the high-speed shinkansen bullet trains.

Biden 'fine' after stumbling while boarding Air Force One

US President Joe Biden is doing fine after stumbling on the steps as he climbed aboard Air Force One on Friday, White House spokeswoman Karine Jean-Pierre told reporters.

She suggested high winds at Joint Base Andrews near Washington may have been a factor. Boarding a flight to Atlanta, where he was to speak to the Asian-American community about a shooting there this week, Biden stumbled slightly about halfway up the 25 or so stairs, recovered, then stumbled again and briefly went down on one knee, according to video footage. In late November, Biden suffered a hairline fracture in his right foot while playing with one of his dogs. At 78, Biden was the oldest person ever to assume the presidency when he entered the White House on Jan 20.

Heavy rain, flash flooding batter Australia's east coast



Australia's east coast was smashed by heavy rains yesterday, sparking dangerous flash flooding that forced the evacuation of multiple regions as the fast moving waters unmoored houses, engulfed roads, stranded towns and cut power lines. In Sydney, the country's biggest city, authorities pleaded for people to stay at home as a major dam overflowed and a mini-tornado tore through a western suburb. Most of the coast of New South Wales (NSW) state, which is home to about a third of Australia's 25 million people, has already seen March rainfall records broken and authorities warned the downpour was likely to continue for several days. Television footage showed increasing damage across the state, with water engulfing houses up to the windows, people kayaking through the streets, and damaged roads.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

US, India eye to elevate ties

Pentagon chief dubs New Delhi as the 'central pillar of our approach to the region' amid China tensions

AGENCIES

The United States would like to elevate and strengthen security ties with India, especially in information sharing and logistics, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin told his Indian counterpart yesterday.

Austin is making the first visit by a top member of US President Joe Biden's administration to India as part of efforts to forge an alliance of countries seeking to push back against China's assertiveness in the region.

Austin, after meeting Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, called India a "central pillar of our approach to the region", hailing the two nations' "shared values and converging strategic interests".

"We discussed opportunities to elevate the US-India major defence partnership, which is a priority of the Biden-Harris administration. And



we'll do that through regional security cooperation and military to military interactions and defence trade."

Singh said their meeting focused on "expanding military-to-military engagement across services, information-sharing, cooperation in emerging sectors of defence, and mutual logistics support".

He also urged US industry to invest in India's defence sector, citing what he called liberalised foreign direct investment policies.

Austin met Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on his arrival in New Delhi on Friday.

Austin was due to meet Indian Foreign Minister Jaishankar later yesterday. He leaves today.

He said he raised human rights in India in his talks -- something which the Biden administration says is an important part of both its foreign and defence policy -- but not with Modi.

In 2016, the United States designated India a "Major Defense Partner", and they have since signed a string of deals easing the transfer of advanced weaponry and deepening military cooperation. But Russia is India's biggest arms supplier and New Delhi agreed in 2018 a \$5.4 billion purchase of Moscow's S-400 missile defence system, even though this could lead to US sanctions -- as happened with Turkey.

"There's been no delivery of an S-400 system. And so ... the issue of sanctions is not one that's been discussed," Austin told reporters.

Little common ground as US-China talks end

REUTERS, Anchorage

US and Chinese officials concluded on Friday what Washington called "tough and direct" talks in Alaska, which laid bare the depth of tensions between the world's two largest economies at the outset of the Biden administration.

The two days of meetings, the first high-level in-person talks since President Joe Biden took office, wrapped up after a rare and fiery kickoff on Thursday when the two sides publicly skewered each others' policies in front of TV cameras.

The talks appeared to yield no diplomatic breakthroughs - as expected - but the bitter rivalry on display suggested the two countries had little common ground to reset relations that have sunk to the lowest level in decades.

The run-up to the discussions in Anchorage was marked by a flurry of moves by Washington that showed it was taking a firm stance, as well as by blunt talk from Beijing warning the United States to discard illusions that it would compromise.

On Friday, members of China's delegation left the hotel without speaking to reporters, but China's top diplomat Yang Jiechi later told China's CGTN television network that the discussions had been constructive and beneficial, "but of course, there are still differences."

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that the United States raised Chinese human rights abuses issues in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong as well as cyberattacks and pressure on Taiwan.

But Blinken said the two sides also had intersecting interests on Iran, North Korea, Afghanistan, and climate change, and that the United States had accomplished during the meetings what it had come to do.



Pak PM Khan tests positive for Covid-19

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan tested positive for Covid-19 yesterday, officials said, just two days after he received his first vaccination against the disease.

The 68-year-old former top cricketer received a shot of the Chinese-produced Sinopharm vaccine on Thursday, as the country battles a third wave of the virus.

"At this point, the prime minister's office can only confirm that the honourable prime minister has tested positive for Covid-19 and has self-isolated," his office said.

Khan was suffering from a mild cough and a mild fever, his spokesman Shahbaz Gill later added.

His aides were quick to put distance between the diagnosis and his first jab of the two-dose vaccine.

"Please do not link it to the corona vaccine. Immunity develops a few weeks after the vaccine is given. Make sure to vaccinate your elders and loved ones. Be careful," Gill added.

Khan was probably infected before he got the vaccine shot, during a series of public engagements this week, information minister Shibli Faraz told the Geo News television channel.

Case numbers in Pakistan began to rise again in recent weeks, soon after the UK variant was first reported in Karachi in late December.

More than 620,000 cases and nearly 13,800 deaths have been reported since the pandemic reached the country, but limited testing suggests true figures are probably much higher.

Carbon pawprint: Is man's best friend the planet's enemy?

AFP, Paris

Is your adorable puppy as bad for the planet as a gas-guzzling SUV?

While the precise carbon pawprint of our pets is the source of scientific debate, one thing is becoming increasingly clear: lovable, they may be, cats and dogs have an impact on the planet.

In their 2009 book "Time to Eat the Dog?", Brenda and Robert Vale sparked anger among pet owners for saying that the meat eaten by an average canine companion had twice the carbon footprint as driving an SUV 10,000 kilometres.

A decade on, the verdict is still out on the planetary impact linked to the diets of cats and dogs.

In a 2017 study it was estimated that the 160 million domestic cats and dogs in the US were responsible for between 25-30 percent of the environmental impact of meat consumed in the country.

That's 64 million tonnes of CO2, equivalent to the annual emissions of 13 million petrol or diesel cars.

Kelly Swanson, a professor in animal nutrition at the University of Illinois, disputes the findings of that study, saying the calculations were based on "a lot of inaccurate assumptions".

"Because most pet foods are based on secondary products from the human food industry, especially the ingredients that are animal-based, the environmental costs of those ingredients are not the same as those being consumed by humans," he told AFP.

Pim Martens, professor of sustainable development at Maastricht University, said that -- as with humans -- animal carbon footprints "depend on where you live in the world".

In a 2019 study, Martens found the lifetime emissions of a dog weighing 10-20 kilograms in the Netherlands was anywhere between 4.2 and 17 tonnes of CO2 equivalent.

For the same dog living in China, emissions were between 3.7-19.1 tonnes. In Japan however, the same dog would be expected to produce 1.5-9.9 tonnes during its life.

Ten tonnes of CO2 is roughly the same as the emissions produced by two cars every year.

But Martens said he doesn't find that comparison useful.

"Would that mean that if you don't own a dog or a cat you can drive an SUV or drive more in your car? It doesn't make any sense."

Turkey quits European treaty on violence against women

REUTERS, Ankara

President Tayyip Erdogan pulled Turkey out of an international accord designed to protect women, ministers and an official notice said yesterday, prompting criticism from those who said it was necessary to address rising domestic violence.

The Council of Europe accord, called the Istanbul Convention, pledged to prevent, prosecute and eliminate domestic violence and promote equality. Turkey signed it in 2011 but femicide has surged in the country in recent years.

No reason was provided for the withdrawal in the Official Gazette, where it was announced in the early hours yesterday. But top government officials said domestic law rather than outside fixes would protect women's rights. The convention, forged in Turkey's biggest city, had split Erdogan's ruling AK Party (AKP) and even his family. Last year, officials said the government was mulling pulling out amid a row over how to curb growing violence against women.

Marija Pejcinovic Buric, secretary general of the 47-nation Council of Europe, called Turkey's decision "devastating" given the

violence women and girls face.

"This move is a huge setback to these efforts and all the more deplorable because it compromises the protection of women in Turkey, across Europe and beyond," she said.

Opposition politicians said Erdogan by law cannot act without parliament's consent. But many conservatives in Turkey and in his Islamist-rooted AKP say the pact undermines family structures, encouraging violence.

Some are also hostile to the Istanbul Convention's principle of gender equality and see it as promoting homosexuality, given the pact's non-discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation.

Turkey does not keep official statistics on femicide. But the rate roughly tripled in the last 10 years, according to a group that monitors femicide. So far in 2021, 78 women have been murdered or died under suspicious circumstances, it said.

World Health Organization data has shown 38% of women in Turkey are subject to violence from a partner in their lifetime, compared to about 25% in Europe.

ASTRAZENECA VACCINE AND REPORTED BLOOD CLOTS

Scientists probe new theories

REUTERS, Chicago

Scientists are exploring several possibilities that might explain at least 18 reports of extremely rare blood clots in the brain that occurred in individuals in the days and weeks after receiving the AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccine.

European investigators have put forward one theory that the vaccine triggers an unusual antibody in some rare cases; others are trying to understand whether the cases are linked with birth control pills.

But many scientists say there is no definitive evidence and it is not clear whether or why AstraZeneca's vaccine would cause an issue not shared by other vaccines that target a similar part of the coronavirus.

Most of the rare blood clots have been seen in women and most cases have been reported in Europe. Two cases have been reported in India.

The European Medicines Agency said a preliminary review suggests the vaccine is not associated with an increase in the overall risk of blood clots. But it did not rule out an association with rare cases of blood clots in vessels draining the blood from the brain known as cerebral

venous sinus thrombosis (CVST).

Researchers in Germany and Norway, where some of the cases have been reported, this week hypothesized that the vaccine could be triggering an immune response in which the body produces antibodies that could result in blood clots.



Professor Paal Andre Holme of Norway's Oslo University Hospital, which treated three healthcare workers with severe blood clots after they received the AstraZeneca vaccine, told a news conference on Thursday that "we've made discoveries" that could "explain the clinical progression of our patients." Holme warned that the findings were preliminary.

A team of German researchers at Greifswald University Clinic on Friday said they came to a similar conclusion.

If proven correct, there may be a way to treat the condition, the scientists said.

EMA researchers on Thursday said they are undertaking several investigations to determine whether the rare blood clots might be linked with the vaccine, or occurring by chance. They noted that many of the events occurred in younger women.

CVST, though rare, has been associated with pregnancy and the use of oral contraceptives. "That's one of the things that we will be further investigating in the near future," said Sabine Straus, chair of EMA's safety committee.

EMA also intends to investigate whether those who developed the condition had been infected previously or at the time of the vaccine with Covid-19, which can cause blood clots.

Several US vaccine experts remain cautious about the antibody hypothesis and said the high level of publicity of the events could be causing more clinicians to report the condition than normal, which would make it appear that the events are related to the vaccine. AstraZeneca's vaccine has received emergency use authorization in 70 countries, but it has not yet been approved in the United States.



People bring flowers to the memorial sight set up outside of The Gold Spa in Atlanta, Georgia, on Friday. President Joe Biden deplored a surge in anti-Asian violence in the United States after a deadly shooting rampage in Georgia which killed eight people, including six women of Asian descent, and asked all Americans to stand together against hate during a visit to the state on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP