

ALLEGED UIGHUR DISINFORMATION

UK slams China sanctions

AFP, Beijing

Britain's prime minister accused China of "gross rights violations" against the Muslim Uighur minority yesterday after Beijing aimed sanctions at UK lawmakers and lobby groups, widening a rift with Western powers over alleged abuses in Xinjiang.

At least one million Uighurs and people from other mostly Muslim groups have been held in camps in northwestern Xinjiang, according to rights groups, who accuse authorities of forcibly sterilising women and imposing forced labour.

The European Union, Britain, Canada and United States sanctioned several members of Xinjiang's political and economic hierarchy this week in co-ordinated action over allegations of widespread abuse in the region, which the US has said amounts to genocide.

Beijing, which insists Xinjiang is an "internal affair", has gone into attack mode, imposing sanctions on individuals from the EU and Britain who have taken up the Uighur cause.

It has also fuelled a social media PR war against several Western brands operating inside China, which has seen calls for boycotts, and celebrities dropping endorsements.

Yesterday, China announced sanctions against nine British individuals and four entities, saying they had "maliciously spread lies and disinformation" over Beijing's treatment of Uighurs.



People inspect the damage after two trains have collided near the city of Sohag in Egypt yesterday. At least 32 people were killed and 66 injured in the collision in southern Egypt, the health ministry said.

PHOTO: REUTERS

NEWS IN BRIEF

NYT digital 'NFT' article sells for \$563,000

A New York Times columnist on Thursday sold one of his articles in digital form for \$563,000, the latest example of the craze surrounding "non fungible tokens," which collectors are snapping up. Keven Roose's article entitled "Buy This Column on the Blockchain" was itself aimed at trying to test the market as to what sort of items would sell in the form of an "NFT." A non-fungible token (NFT) is a digital object, such as a drawing, piece of music, photo, or video, with a certificate of authenticity created by blockchain technology. This authentication by a network of computers is considered inviolable. The virtual object, which is actually a computer file, can be exchanged or sold with its certificate. NFTs have become popular in the past six months, as wealthy collectors turn to the digital market during the pandemic.

Pfizer begins Covid vaccine trial in young children

Pfizer said Thursday it had begun clinical trials for its Covid vaccine in children under the age of eleven, an early sign of the next stage of the global immunization campaign. "Together with our partner BioNTech, we have dosed the first healthy children in a global Phase



1/2/3 continuous study to further evaluate the safety, tolerability, and immunogenicity of the Pfizer-BioNTech Covid-19 vaccine," the company said in a statement to AFP. "We are proud to start this much needed study for children and families eagerly awaiting a possible vaccine option." According to details posted on the site clinicaltrials.gov, the company is testing three different dosing levels for use in this age group. The company is already testing the shots in children aged 12 to 15, and its US emergency authorization covers people aged 16 and up.

Spain police bust suspected al-Qaeda finance ring

Spanish police said Thursday they had dismantled a ring suspected of financing Al-Qaeda and arrested three men, including the top representative of Spain's Muslim community. Those detained were suspected of having "exploited an NGO to finance the activities of terrorist fighters," a National Police statement said. The organisation is believed to have collected donations for orphaned children in Syria, but "a part" of the funds went instead to areas of Syria "controlled by Al-Qaeda militias with the aim of supporting their fighters", it added. "Another part of the proceeds was destined to defray the expenses of a school centre for orphaned children located in a conflict zone, whose activities were focused on the training of future mujahideen."

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

China will not surpass US

Says Biden, vows to invest heavily to ensure America prevails in rivalry between two largest economies

AGENCIES

US President Joe Biden on Thursday said he would prevent China from passing the United States to become the most powerful country in the world, vowing to invest heavily to ensure America prevails in the rivalry between the world's two largest economies.

Biden said he had spent "hours upon hours" with Xi Jinping when he served as vice president under former President Barack Obama, and was convinced the Chinese president believed autocracy - not democracy - held the key to the future.

The Democratic president said he had made it clear to Xi that the United States was not looking for confrontation, but would insist China abide by international rules for fair competition, fair trade and respect for human rights.

"China has an overall goal ... to become the leading country in the world, the wealthiest country in the world, and the most powerful country in the world," he told reporters at



the White House. "That's not going to happen on my watch because the United States is going to continue to grow."

Biden took aim at Xi and Russian President Vladimir Putin for embracing autocracy.

"He's one of the guys, like Putin, who thinks that autocracy is the wave of the future, (and) democracy can't function in an ever-complex world," the president told his first news conference since taking office in January.

Earlier in March, Biden told ABC News he believed Putin was "a killer,"

which sparked fury in Moscow, reports Reuters.

"He (Xi) doesn't have a democratic - with a small 'd' - bone in his body, but he's a smart, smart guy," he said.

The US president also warned North Korea that the United States will "respond accordingly" if it escalates its military testing, after Pyongyang fired two missiles in its first major provocation since he took office.

The nuclear-armed North has a long history of using weapons tests to ramp up tensions, in a carefully calibrated process to try to forward its objectives, reports AFP.

Biden's response demonstrates a change of tone from his predecessor Donald Trump, who engaged in an extraordinary diplomatic bromance with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and last year repeatedly played down similar short-range launches.

Pyongyang had been biding its time since the new administration took office, not even officially acknowledging its existence until last week.

KHASHOGGI MURDER PROBE

UN investigator criticises Saudi 'bully-boy tactics'

AFP, Geneva

A UN rights expert yesterday accused Saudi Arabia of bullying after a top official allegedly threatened her life following her probe into journalist Jamal Khashoggi's 2018 murder.

"The Saudi Arabia threat against me was brazen, it took place in a high level diplomatic setting and it was made public, confirmed by the UN," Agnes Callamard said in a tweet.

Such "bully-boy tactics should not find shelter anywhere," she insisted. "They do not belong at the UN, but regrettably, often find accommodation there."

At a meeting with UN officials in Geneva in January 2020, a senior Saudi official threatened twice to have Callamard "taken care of" if she was not restrained by the United Nations, The Guardian newspaper reported this week.

Without naming the Saudi official, Callamard -- the UN's special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary and arbitrary executions -- told the British daily that the comment was perceived by her Geneva-based colleagues as a "death threat".

Rupert Colville, a spokesman for the UN rights office, confirmed to AFP that "the details in the Guardian story about the threat aimed at Agnes Callamard are accurate". The UN body had informed Callamard about the threat, he added.

"The Secretary-General's message is very simple and very clear, that any and all such threats are unacceptable," a spokesperson for the UN chief said. Awad Alawwad, the head of Saudi Arabia's Human Rights Commission, meanwhile said Thursday that Callamard and UN officials believed he made the threat, something he rejected "in the strongest terms."



Polling officials check election materials after collecting them from a distribution centre ahead of the first phase of West Bengal state assembly election, in Purulia district, India yesterday. The much-awaited assembly elections in West Bengal will be held over eight rounds from today to April 29 for 294 seats.

PHOTO: REUTERS

COUP IN MYANMAR

Four more protesters killed

Tensions high as activists call for Armed Forces Day protests; Russia extends support to junta

AGENCIES

Myanmar security forces shot dead four pro-democracy protesters yesterday, witnesses and local media reports said, as activist leaders called for a huge show of defiance to the ruling military junta on the country's Armed Forces Day today.

The World Bank said Myanmar's economy could slump 10% this year due to the turmoil since the coup last month that overthrew the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi.

But in a week that saw international pressure on the generals ramped up with new US and European sanctions, Russia offered support for the military and said it wanted to strengthen ties.

Protesters against the junta have taken to the streets almost daily since the Feb.1 coup, prompting an uncompromising crackdown by the security forces.



Demonstrations took place across the country overnight and yesterday, including in the Mandalay and Sagaing regions, as well as in Karen and Chin states, media reports said.

Security forces opened fire on protesters waving black flags in the southern town of Myeik, a witness

said. "Two were killed by head shots," the witness told Reuters. "We cannot pick up the (third) dead body as many security forces are there".

Several other people were wounded, said the witness, who requested anonymity for fear of retribution.

Another witness said he had seen a fourth body. Myanmar Now news said four people were killed in the town. At least 320 people have been killed in the weeks of unrest that followed the coup, according to figures as of Thursday night from the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) activist group.

Its data shows that at least 25 percent of those who were killed died from shots to the head, raising suspicions they were deliberately targeted for killing.

Tugs, dredgers try to free Ever Given

Report says Suez blockage holding up \$9.6b of goods a day

AGENCIES

Tugboats and dredgers were working yesterday to free a giant container ship blocking Egypt's Suez Canal for a fourth day, forcing companies to re-route services from the vital shipping lane around Africa.

The MV Ever Given, which is longer than four football fields, has been wedged diagonally across the entire canal since Tuesday, when social media users began posting about it.

The blockage has caused huge traffic jams for dozens of ships and major delays in the delivery of oil and other products.

An official from Shoei Kisen Kaisha, the Japanese company that owns the ship, told AFP yesterday that crews were working to refloat it.

"Tug boats and dredgers are being used to crush rocks" in efforts to dislodge the boat, she told AFP, adding that the company did not have information on the exact status of damage to the vessel.

Global shipping giant Maersk and



Germany's Hapag-Lloyd have both said they are looking into re-routing around the southern tip of Africa.

"With the Suez Canal set to remain blocked for at least another day or two, shipping companies are being forced to confront the spectre of taking the far longer route around the Cape of Good Hope to get to Europe or the east coast of North America," said Lloyd's List, a shipping data and news company.

"The first container ship to do this is Evergreen's Ever Greet... a sistership to Ever Given," it said in a statement.

The Suez Canal drastically shortens travel between Asia and Europe.

The Singapore-Rotterdam route, for example, is 6,000 kilometres (3,700 miles) and up to two weeks shorter via the canal than going around Africa's Cape of Good Hope.

The stranded Ever Given is holding up an estimated \$9.6bn (£7bn) of goods each day, according to shipping data.

Data from shipping expert Lloyd's List values the canal's westbound traffic at roughly \$5.1bn a day, and eastbound daily traffic at around \$4.5bn, reports BBC.

Egypt's Suez Canal Authority has said between 15,000 and 20,000 cubic metres of sand would have to be removed in order to reach a depth of 12-16 metres and refloat the ship.

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's seaports adviser, Mohab Mamish, told AFP late Thursday that "maritime navigation will resume again within 48-72 hours, maximum".

Hat-trick for Mamata or win for BJP?

FROM PAGE 1

Three lawmakers from TMC have already joined BJP recently, further consolidating its position in the eastern state.

Despite winning just three seats in the last election, the BJP now has 36 legislators in the assembly as 26 from TMC, four from CPIM and three from Congress joined the ruling party.

TMC, the party that came to power first in 2011 by breaking the 34-year reign of the left-leaning Communist Party of India (Marxist), is also striving to retain power for a third consecutive term in the staggered polls.

On the other hand, the Left Front, comprising CPIM, Congress and the newly-formed Indian Secular Front, is yet to make any impact on the voters, show multiple polls surveys.

Of them, Congress ruled West Bengal for 30 years and CPIM for 34 years.

However, Abbas Siddiqui, a Furfura Sharif prizad, of Indian Secular Front, hogged the limelight after appearing in politics and analysts think Siddiqui can woo Muslim constituents, which is around 27 percent of the electorate in West Bengal and considered TMC supporters.

Both BJP and TMC sought to outdo each other in polls promises and campaign rhetoric and repeatedly claimed they would win over 200 seats in 23 districts. And whichever party gets

the magic figure -- 148 seats -- will form the government.

The first phase elections will be held for 30 constituencies that will cover five districts -- Paschim Midnapore, Purba Midnapore, Bankura, Jhargram, and Purulia. The eighth and final phase will take place on April 29 and the counting of votes will take place on May 2.

In those 30 constituencies in the last assembly polls in 2016, BJP got 8.6 percent of the votes while in the last Lok Sabha elections which consisted of these 30 seats, the party got 46.31 percent votes -- an increase of 38 percentage points.

However, recent surveys hinted at a neck-to-neck battle between TMC and BJP with no party expected to reach the magic figure.

In the run-up to the elections, BJP has left no tactic unused in its arsenal, deploying heavyweight campaigners and popular actors, singers, and other artists.

Apart from PM Modi, Home Minister Amit Shah, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, Women and Child Development Minister Smriti Irani, Petroleum Minister Dharmendra Pradhan and movie stars Mithun Chakraborty, Srabanti Chatterjee and singer and central minister Babul Supriyo were on the high-decibel campaigns.

TMC also betted big on strong

leaders like Mamata's nephew Abhishek Banerjee, who is considered to be her successor, TMC minister and famous actor Bratya Basu, and popular stars like Dev, Mimi Chakraborty, Nusrat Jahan, Saayoni Ghosh, Raj Chakraborty and Sayantika Banerjee.

Mamata Banerjee has led the Trinamool campaign, albeit in a wheelchair. She sustained injuries while on a visit to Nandigram, from where she is contesting the polls to take on her former ministerial colleague Suwendu Adhikari, who joined the BJP last December.

Adhikari, a long time minister from TMC and considered to be a key organiser of the party, turns out to be a major factor in the polls. His joining the BJP irked Mamata, forcing her to change her constituency -- from Bhabanipur to Nandigram -- to face Suwendu.

In the first phase, more than 73 lakh voters will decide the fate of a total of 191 candidates, including 21 women candidates across 30 assembly segments.

The elections will be held amid tight security with the Election Commission deploying around 732 companies of Central Armed Police Forces that will guard 10,288 polling booths housed on 7,061 premises as most of the seats are in the once-Naxal-affected Jungle Mahal region.