

'Your visa should be cancelled'

Mamata slams Modi's vote politics in Bangladesh

NDTV ONLINE

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee yesterday hit out at Prime Minister Narendra Modi for his visit to Bangladesh, accusing him of trying to influence voters in West Bengal where polling began for the eight-phase assembly election in the morning.

"Elections are underway here and he (PM) goes to Bangladesh and lectures on Bengal. It is a total violation of code of conduct of the election," Mamata said at a campaign event in Kharagpur according to news agency ANI.

"In 2019 Lok Sabha polls, when a Bangladeshi actor attended our rally, BJP spoke to Bangladesh government and cancelled his visa. When polls are underway here, you (PM) go to Bangladesh to seek votes from one section of people. Why shouldn't your visa be cancelled? We will complain to the Election Commission," she said.

Mamata Banerjee was referring to the PM offering prayers at a temple in Bangladesh's Orakandi, the birthplace of Hindu mystic figure and Matua community's spiritual guru Harichand Thakur, earlier in the day. Orakandi is the abode of hundreds

from the Hindu Matua community, a large number of whom are now residents of West Bengal and an important factor in elections.

PM Modi, whose visit during the temple was seen by many as a political message, also addressed members of the Matua community, saying, "I was speaking to some people here. They were saying who could have thought that India's Prime Minister would visit Orakandi."

He also promised to make it easier for people from India to visit Orakandi and announced that his government will upgrade a girls' school and set up a primary school in the area.

Not taking too kindly to the canvassing across the border, Mamata Banerjee said, "Sometimes they say Mamata has brought people from Bangladesh and did infiltration. But he (PM) himself goes to Bangladesh for vote marketing."

West Bengal is holding elections in a record eight phases starting from yesterday in a contest that has seen the BJP pull out all stops, including poaching a large number of Trinamool leaders, to unseat the two-time chief minister. Votes will be counted on May 2.



Family members cry in front of a man after he was shot dead during an anti-coup protesters crackdown in Yangon, Myanmar, yesterday. Security forces killed more than 90 people across Myanmar yesterday in one of the bloodiest days of protests since a military coup last month, news reports and witnesses said.

PHOTO: REUTERS

N Korea slams US 'provocation'

AFP, Seoul

North Korea yesterday threatened a further military build-up in response to Joe Biden's condemnation of this week's missile launches, a weapons test that marked Pyongyang's first substantive provocation since the US president 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.

Following the launch, Biden labelled the test a violation of UN resolutions and advised the isolated state against ramping up military testing, warning that "there will be responses if they choose to escalate."

Ri Pyong Chol, a leading official in North Korea's missile programme who supervised the test, said the president's comments had revealed his "deep-seated hostility" to the regime.

"Such remarks from the US president are an undisguised encroachment on our state's right to self-defence and provocation to it," Ri

said in a statement published by state media outlet KCNA.

"If the US continues with its thoughtless remarks without thinking of the consequences, it may be faced with something that is not good,"



he added, warning that North Korea was prepared to "continue to increase our most thoroughgoing and overwhelming military power."

The comments came at a time when Washington is in the final stages of a policy review on North Korea, with signals of a firm line on denuclearisation, sanctions and human rights.

Leif-Eric Easley, a professor at Ewha University in Seoul, said Ri's remarks

were "essentially a threat that North Korea will respond to the US policy review with more tests".

Pyongyang has made rapid progress in its capabilities under leader Kim Jong Un, testing missiles capable of reaching the entire continental United States as tensions mounted in 2017.

North Korea has reported that the Thursday launch, its first substantive effort since Biden came to office, was a test of a new "tactical guided projectile" with a solid-fuel engine.

Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga called the two weapons launched from North Korea's east coast ballistic missiles, which it is banned from developing under UN Security Council resolutions.

A UN sanctions committee focused on nuclear-armed North Korea has asked its experts to investigate the test and European members of the Security Council have requested an urgent meeting to discuss North Korea.

The North is already under multiple sets of international sanctions for its banned nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programmes.

Biden suggests rival plan to China's 'Belt and Road'

AFP, Washington

US President Joe Biden has suggested founding an initiative from "democratic" countries to rival China's trillion-dollar Belt and Road infrastructure initiative as tensions spike between the Asian power and Western nations.

Biden said late Friday that he floated the proposal in a call with British Prime Minister Boris Johnson amid a row over sanctions against abuses targeting the Uyghur minority in China's northwestern Xinjiang region.

"I suggested we should have, essentially, a similar initiative coming from the democratic states, helping those communities around the world that, in fact, need help," Biden told reporters, referring to Belt and Road.

Beijing's influence has grown in some nations in recent years through loans and projects under the initiative, raising concerns among regional powers and Western nations. China has helped scores of countries build or develop roads, railways, dams and ports.

London, in its readout of the call between Biden and Johnson, did not mention the US president's proposal for a Western response to Belt and Road, but did note that the two leaders discussed "significant action" to impose sanctions on "human rights violators" in Xinjiang.

The European Union, Britain, Canada and the United States sanctioned several members of Xinjiang's political and economic hierarchy this week in coordinated action over the rights allegations, prompting retaliation from Beijing in the form of sanctions on individuals from the EU and UK.

Beijing, which insists the situation in Xinjiang is an "internal affair," announced sanctions Friday against nine British individuals and four entities, saying they had "maliciously spread lies and disinformation" over the treatment of the Uyghurs.

NEWS IN BRIEF

China sanctions US, Canada bodies over Xinjiang

China yesterday imposed sanctions against two American religious rights officials and one Canadian lawmaker in response to sanctions imposed by the United States and Canada over rights violations in Xinjiang. China will take measures against the chair and vice-chair of the US government's advisory Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), Gayle Manchin and Tony Perkins, the foreign ministry said in a statement. It also sanctioned Canadian member of parliament Michael Chong, vice-chair of parliament's Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development (FAAE), as well as the FAAE's Subcommittee on International Human Rights, which has eight members and this month presented a report concluding that atrocities had been committed in Xinjiang that constitute crimes against humanity and genocide.

More than 13,000 flee violence in Colombia: UN

More than 13,000 civilians in Colombia have had to flee clashes between armed groups and government forces this year as violence once again flares in the restive country, according to a report to the UN Security Council. "The situation in the Pacific region is especially worrying," UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres said in the report, which was obtained by AFP on Friday. Colombia is currently experiencing the worst violence the country has seen since the 2016 peace accord between Bogota and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) group ended a half-century civil war. Some guerrilla fighters refused to join that peace process, and have continued their struggle, while also mixing with drug-traffickers in lawless areas of Colombia.

Taliban takeover of Afghanistan possible!

US intelligence agencies have told the Biden administration that the Taliban could overrun most of Afghanistan within two to three years if US troops leave before a power-sharing deal is reached between the warring sides, a news report said on Friday. Such a takeover potentially would allow al Qaeda to rebuild in Afghanistan, the New York Times reported, quoting anonymous US officials. President Joe Biden is deciding whether to meet a May 1 deadline for the withdrawal of the last 3,500 American troops that was set in a February 2020 accord struck with the Taliban under his predecessor, Donald Trump. Biden on Thursday told his first White House news conference that it would be hard to comply with the deadline.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS



This satellite imagery released by Maxar Technologies shows tug boats and dredgers attempting to free the MV Ever Given on Friday, in the Suez Canal.

PHOTO: AFP

Hopes rise of ending Suez Canal blockage in days

AFP, Cairo

Hopes rose yesterday that a mega-ship blocking Egypt's Suez Canal could be refloated within days, even as the crisis forced companies to consider re-routing vessels around the southern tip of Africa.

The president of Shoen Kisen -- the Japanese firm which owns the giant container vessel -- said it could be freed from the canal bed later yesterday, while the parent company of the Dutch salvage firm in charge of the operation eyed a target of early next week.

Millions of dollars are at stake. Billions of dollars of cargo are now stalled at either end of the vital shipping lane between Asia and Europe, with their owners mulling whether to wait it out or take the longer and more expensive route around the Cape of Good Hope at the cost of up to 12 additional days at sea.

The MV Ever Given, which is longer than four football fields, has been wedged diagonally across the span of the canal since Tuesday, blocking the waterway in both directions.

At a press conference in Japan Friday, Shoen Kisen president Yukito Higaki told local media

there were no signs of damage to its engines and various instruments.

In the Netherlands, the executive director of Royal Boskalis, parent company of Smit Salvage, set a less demanding target.

"With the ships we'll have in place by then, the earth we've managed to dredge, and the high tide, let's hope that'll be enough to budge the ship at the start of next week," Peter Berdowski told a public television chat-show late Friday.

The blockage has caused a huge traffic jam of more than 200 ships at both ends of the 193-kilometre (120-mile) long canal and major delays in the delivery of oil and other products.

Egypt's Suez Canal Authority said the mega-ship veered off course and ran aground when winds reaching 40 knots whipped up a sandstorm that affected visibility.

The 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. If those efforts fail, salvage teams will look to unload some of the Ever Given's cargo and take advantage of a spring high tide due to start on Sunday night to move the vessel.

Iran, China sign landmark 25-year cooperation agreement

REUTERS, Dubai

Foreign ministers from China and Iran, which are both subject to US sanctions, signed a landmark 25-year cooperation agreement yesterday.

"Relations between the two countries have now reached the level of strategic partnership and China seeks to comprehensively improve relations with Iran," China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi was quoted by Iran's state media as telling his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif.

"Our relations with Iran will not be affected by the current situation, but will be permanent and strategic," Wang said ahead of the televised signing ceremony.

"Iran decides independently on its relations with other countries and is not like some countries that change their position with one phone call," he said.

Wang met President Hassan Rouhani ahead of the signing of the agreement in Tehran, which is expected to include Chinese investments in key sectors such as energy and infrastructure.

Rouhani voiced appreciation for Beijing's support within Tehran's 2015 nuclear deal with world powers and called for more coronavirus vaccine exports to Iran, the worst-hit country by the pandemic in the Middle East.



"Cooperation between the two countries is very important for the implementation of the nuclear accord and the fulfilment of obligations by European countries," Rouhani said, according to his official website.

US President Joe Biden has sought to revive talks with Iran on the nuclear deal abandoned by former President Donald Trump in 2018, although harsh economic measures remain in place which Tehran wants removed

before any negotiations resume.

"Under the new administration, the Americans want to reconsider their policy and return to the nuclear accord, and China welcomes their move," Wang said. "We will provide more coronavirus vaccines to Iran and Iran is our priority for the vaccines."

Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said the agreement was a "roadmap" for trade, economic and transportation cooperation, with a "special focus on the private sectors of the two sides".

China, Iran's largest trading partner and a long-standing ally, agreed in 2016 to boost bilateral trade by more than 10 times to \$600 billion over a decade.

Its commerce ministry said on Thursday that Beijing will try to safeguard the 2015 Iran nuclear deal and defend the legitimate interests of Sino-Iranian relations.

The United States and the other Western powers party to the deal are at odds with Tehran over which side should first return to the accord, which was abandoned by former US President Donald Trump in 2018.



Kimono-clad women from Thailand take selfies among blooming cherry blossoms at Ueno Park in Tokyo, Japan, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS