

## 'Why shouldn't your visa be cancelled?'

Mamata slams Modi's 'vote marketing' in Bangladesh

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee today accused Prime Minister Narendra Modi of violating the Election Commission of India's model code of conduct by addressing people at the Matua community at Orakandi in Bangladesh and trying to influence voters in the assembly polls in the state and Assam.

"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 told an election rally in Kharagpur.

The first phase of polling in West Bengal and Assam was held yesterday.

Mamata recalled that when Bangladeshi actor Ghazi Abdul Noor had attended a rally organized by her party Trinamool Congress during 2019 Lok Sabha elections, he was served a 'Leave India' notice for violation of the poll code of conduct.

"In the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, when a Bangladeshi actor attended our rally, the BJP spoke to the 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 EC," she said.



Mamata said "sometimes they (BJP) say Mamata has brought people from Bangladesh and aided in infiltration. But he [PM] himself goes to Bangladesh for vote marketing."

Her remarks came on a day when Modi, as part of his visit to Bangladesh, visited Orakandi village to pay tributes to the founder of the Matua community, Harichand Thakur.

On meeting the community, he said he felt the same emotions as felt by Matua community members in India.

Orakandi in Gopalganj district is the birthplace of Matua community's spiritual guru Harichand Thakur.

Many members of Matua community have settled in West Bengal and is a key segment of its electorate. It is seen as swaying the outcome of polling in at least 27 constituencies.

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.

West Bengal is holding elections in a record eight phases starting Saturday 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 CM. Votes will be counted on May 2.



Family members cry in front of a man after he was shot dead during an anti-coup protest in Yangon, Myanmar, yesterday. Security forces killed more than 100 people across Myanmar yesterday in the bloodiest day 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 minister 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



Activists scuffle with riot police as they are stopped in front of a police barricade to prevent them from attending a gathering to protest against Turkey's withdrawal from Istanbul Convention, an international accord designed to protect women, in Istanbul, Turkey, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## Cities worldwide turn off their lights to mark Earth Hour

AFP, Singapore

Cities around the world were turning off their lights yesterday for Earth Hour, with this year's event highlighting the link between the destruction of nature and increasing outbreaks of diseases like Covid-19.

Starting off the event, at 8:30 pm the skylines of Asian metropolises from Singapore to Hong Kong went dark, as did landmarks including Sydney Opera House.

The annual event calls for action on climate change and the environment, and this year, organisers said they want to highlight the link between the destruction of the natural world and the increasing incidence of diseases -- such as Covid-19 -- making the leap from animals to humans.

Experts believe human activity such as widespread deforestation, destruction of animals' habitats and climate change are spurring this increase, and warn more pandemics could occur if nothing is done.

"Whether it is a decline in pollinators, fewer fish in the ocean and rivers, disappearing forests or the wider loss of biodiversity, the evidence is mounting that

nature is in free fall," said Marco Lambertini, director general of the WWF, which organises Earth Hour.

"And this is because of the way we live our lives and run our economies.

"Protecting nature is our moral responsibility but losing it also increases our vulnerability to pandemics, accelerates climate change, and threatens our food security."

In Singapore, people at the waterfront watched as skyscrapers went dark and in a nearby park, Gardens by the Bay, a group of futuristic-looking tree sculptures had their lights turned off.

Earth Hour is about "more than just saving energy, it's more like remembering our impact on the environment," Ian Tan, 18, told AFP at the park.

But he was not convinced the event, which has been running since 2007, made much of a difference.

"One hour is not enough for us to remember that climate change is actually a problem -- I don't really see (Earth Hour) as very significant," he said.

Other landmarks that were due to switch off the lights to mark Earth Hour include the Eiffel Tower, the Colosseum in Rome and the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, according to organisers.

## 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