

UIGHUR 'GENOCIDE' US condemns China's tit-for-tat sanctions

REUTERS, Beijing/Ottawa

The United States on Saturday condemned China's sanctions against two American religious-rights officials and a Canadian lawmaker in a dispute over Beijing's treatment of Uighur Muslims and other minorities.

China's moves "only contribute to the growing international scrutiny of the ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang. We stand in solidarity with Canada, the UK, the EU, and other partners and allies around the world in calling on the (China) to end the human rights violations and abuses," US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said in a statement.

Beijing's sanctions followed those imposed by the United States, European Union, Britain and Canada earlier this week for what they say are violations of the rights of Uighur Muslims and other Turkic minorities in the western Chinese region of Xinjiang.

Activists and UN rights experts say at least a million Muslims have been detained in camps in Xinjiang. The activists and some Western politicians accuse China of using torture, forced labour and sterilisations.

China has repeatedly denied all accusations of abuse and says its camps offer vocational training and are needed to fight extremism.

Blinken's statement came after Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau denounced Beijing and vowed to defend human rights.

China sanctioned Canadian opposition lawmaker Michael Chong, vice-chair of parliament's Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development and its Subcommittee on International Human Rights, which this month presented a report concluding that atrocities in Xinjiang constitute crimes against humanity and genocide.



Revellers smeared in colour powder celebrate Holi, the spring festival of colours, in Siliguri, India, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

FIRST PHASE OF WEST BENGAL POLLS

BJP will win 26 seats out of 30

Claims Amit Shah irking Mamata

NDTV ONLINE

Indian Home Minister Amit Shah's claim that the BJP will win 26 of the 30 seats for which polling was held in the first phase of West Bengal assembly elections a day ago, earned a major eyeroll from Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee yesterday who said that "the people's verdict will be evident after votes are counted."

Not naming Shah, who made the statement at a BJP press conference in New Delhi earlier in the day, Mamata questioned how such a claim could be made just a day after the elections were held. Votes for all eight phases of the election are set to be counted on May 2.

"A leader today said that the BJP will win 26 of 30 seats, why did he not claim all 30, did he leave the rest for Congress and CPI(M)?" she quipped, addressing a rally in the Chandipur constituency, next to Nandigram, from where she is contesting.

Asserting that she will not predict anything, Mamata said that it is the people's verdict which will be evident after counting.

"Since 84 per cent votes were polled, I can surmise that people have voted for us," she said.

Trinamool Congress Rajya Sabha MP Derek O'Brien also said in a tweet shortly after Shah's press conference in Delhi, "Mind games won't work, Mo-Sha" (a reference to Modi-Shah).

Facing the full might of the BJP which has fielded Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Amit Shah, and Rajnath Singh besides the Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath among others, Mamata Banerjee has been trying to frame the contest as one between outsiders and people from Bengal.

SUSPECTED SUICIDE BOMBING AT INDONESIAN CHURCH

Two killed, 14 wounded

REUTERS, Jakarta

Two suspected suicide bombers attacked a Catholic church in the Indonesian city of Makassar yesterday, wounding fourteen people on the first day of the Easter Holy Week, officials said.

The congregation was concluding their mass inside the church on the island of Sulawesi when the attackers detonated at least one device outside, police said. The two suspects were the only fatalities.

"I strongly condemn this act of terrorism and I have ordered the police chief to thoroughly investigate the perpetrators' networks and tear down the networks to their roots," President Joko Widodo said in an online broadcast following the attack.

Authorities were looking into which radical networks the bombers came from and whether the attack was linked to recent arrests of suspected militants, national police spokesman Argo Yuwono said.

In January, a counter-terrorism unit raided a militant hideout in Makassar



and killed two men suspected by police of involvement in twin bombings at a Philippine church in 2019 that killed more than 20 people.

Jokowi, as the president is widely known, urged people to remain calm and said everybody could worship "without fear".

Father Wilhemus Tulak, a priest at the church, told Indonesian media that a suspected bomber tried to enter the church grounds on a motorbike, but had been stopped by a security guard.

Security camera footage showed a blast that blew flame, smoke and debris into the middle of the road.

Ansyaad Mbai, former chief of the

National Counterterrorism Agency, said the perpetrators were likely part of the same group responsible for a bombing in Jolo, the Philippines, in 2020.

Police blamed the Islamic State-inspired Jamaah Ansharut Daulah group for suicide attacks in 2018 on churches and a police post in the city of Surabaya that killed over 30 people.

Makassar, Sulawesi's biggest city, has considerable Christian minority and followers of other religions.

"Whatever the motive is, this act isn't justified by any religion because it harms not just one person but others, too," Yaqut Cholil Qoumas, Indonesia's religious affairs minister, said in a statement.

Indonesia's deadliest Islamist militant attack took place on the tourist island of Bali in 2002, when bombers killed 202 people, most of them foreign tourists.

In subsequent years, security forces in Indonesia scored some major successes in tackling militancy, but more recently there has been a resurgence of militant violence.

Tugs, dredgers still struggle to free ship blocking Suez

REUTERS, Ismailia

Suez Canal salvage teams were alternating between dredging and tugging yesterday to dislodge a massive container ship blocking the busy waterway, while two sources said efforts had been complicated by rock under the ship's bow.

Dredgers working to dislodge the stranded vessel have so far shifted 27,000 cubic metres of sand, to a depth of 18 metres, and efforts would continue around the clock according to wind conditions and tides, the Suez Canal Authority (SCA) said in a statement.

Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has ordered preparations for the possible removal of some of the ship's cargo to help refloat it, SCA Chairman Osama Rabie told Egypt's Extra News.

The 400-metre (430-yard) long Ever Given became jammed diagonally across a southern section of the canal in high winds more than five days ago, halting shipping traffic in one of the world's busiest waterways.

As of Saturday, 321 boats were waiting to transit the canal, including dozens of



container ships, bulk carriers and liquefied natural gas (LNG) or liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) vessels.

About 15% of world shipping traffic transits the Suez Canal.

Shipping rates for oil product tankers nearly doubled after the ship became stranded, and the blockage has disrupted global supply chains, threatening costly delays for companies already dealing with COVID-19 restrictions.

If the blockage drags on, shippers may decide to reroute their cargoes around the Cape of Good Hope, adding about two weeks to journeys and extra fuel costs.

NEWS IN BRIEF



Indian President Kovind to undergo bypass procedure

Indian President Ram Nath Kovind will undergo a planned bypass procedure at AIIMS tomorrow, the Rashtrapati Bhavan said, adding that his health is stable. "The President of India, Shri Ram Nath Kovind has been shifted to the AIIMS, Delhi, in the afternoon today (March 27, 2021). Post investigations, doctors have advised him to undergo a planned bypass procedure which is expected to be performed on the morning of March 30, Tuesday. The President's health is stable and he is under the care of the experts at the AIIMS," an official statement said. The president, aged 75, had undergone a health check-up at the military hospital following a chest discomfort on Friday morning.

Saudi-led coalition destroys Houthi rigged boats, drones

The Saudi-led coalition battling Yemen's Houthi forces has destroyed two explosive-laden boats that the Iran-aligned group planned to use in an "imminent" attack launched from the Red Sea port of Hodeidah, Saudi state media reported yesterday. The coalition in separate statements also said it intercepted and destroyed three armed drones launched towards southern Saudi Arabia, including the city of Khamis Mushait. The Houthis, who ousted Yemen's internationally recognised government from the capital, Sanaa, and now hold most of north Yemen, have kept up missile and drone attacks on Saudi Arabia after Riyadh last week presented a new peace initiative.

Sandstorm hits Beijing again

The Chinese capital Beijing woke up yesterday morning shrouded in thick dust carrying extremely high levels of hazardous particles, as a second sandstorm in two weeks hit the city due to winds from drought-hit Mongolia and northwestern China. Visibility in the city was reduced, with the tops of some skyscrapers obscured by the sandstorm, and pedestrians were forced to cover their eyes as gusts of dust swept through the streets. Beijing's official air quality index reached a maximum level of 500 yesterday morning, with floating particles known as PM10 surpassing 2,000 micrograms per cubic metre in some districts. Readings of smaller PM2.5 particles were above 300 micrograms per cubic metre, far higher than China's standard of 35 micrograms.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS, NDTV

Kerala: A state where lotus fails to bloom

THE STRAITS TIMES/ANN

Krishnan Pillai leapt off the motorbike he had parked absently beside a wall adorned with the painting of a saffron lotus, the symbol of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

"Don't show me as a BJP supporter! My friends will laugh at me," he shouted at a news photographer in the town of Alleppey.

"A Malayali choosing BJP is like (north Indian state) Uttar Pradesh choosing (Tamil Nadu party) DMK," the 29-year-old added. His point was that the BJP is as alien to a speaker of Malayalam, the language of Kerala, as the DMK, a party built on a southern Dravidian identity, would be to a voter in the north of India.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's BJP is in power at the centre and in 17 of India's 28 states, but in Kerala, the party has struggled to get its foot in the door. Now this time, in the state election on April 6, it just might.

Kerala has a bipolar polity that has voted the communist-led or Congress-led alliances into the state assembly by turn for decades.

Riding on global appreciation for initially curbing Covid-19 and popularity at home for the ration kits distributed during the pandemic, the ruling communist alliance under cCM Pinarayi Vijayan is hoping for an re-election.

Unlike in the rest of the country, where they are natural allies, the communists and the Congress are bitter rivals in this southern state.



Congress vice-president Rahul Gandhi, who is the parliamentarian from Wayanad constituency in Kerala, has been touring the state, promising universal basic income and secular governance, and accusing Pinarayi of nepotism and corruption.

Meanwhile, the BJP is pitching itself as "a genuine third alternative", said K Surendran, one of its few well-known candidates. Another is the nationally revered engineer, E Sreedharan, the man behind the Delhi Metro and other MRT-like rail systems in Indian cities. He is being projected as the party's chief ministerial face.

The BJP won its first seat in the Kerala assembly only in 2016. Its vote share grew that year from 6.4 per cent in 2009 to 14.9 per cent. It also took a chunk of votes from the Congress in the 2019 parliamentary elections, although not enough to

win any seats.

The BJP's only legislator in Kerala, O Rajagopal, was candid when asked why the party wasn't finding a footing here.

"Kerala has a literacy rate of 90 per cent. They are thinking, they are argumentative. These are habits of educated people," he told the Indian Express.

To this, Shashi Tharoor, Congress parliamentarian from Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala's capital, said the leader had "let the cat out of the bag".

"An authoritative BJP source admits that Keralaites don't vote for the BJP because they are educated & can think!!" he tweeted.

In a state with progressive beliefs and large, politically influential non-Hindu populations - 27 per cent Muslim and 19 per cent Christian

Covax expects full vaccine supplies from Serum in May

REUTERS, New Delhi

A World Health Organization (WHO)-backed programme to supply coronavirus vaccines to poorer countries expects that the Serum Institute of India (SII) will resume full deliveries of the AstraZeneca shot to it in May, UNICEF said on Saturday.

"Deliveries of SII/AZ vaccine are expected to begin fully again by May, with catch-up deliveries to reach every participant's full allocation up to May, accelerating thereafter," a Unicef spokeswoman told Reuters in an email.

The spokeswoman added that the programme, known as Covax, was in talks with New Delhi to secure "some supply" in April too. Covax was expecting a total of 90 million doses from SII in March and April, of which it has received about 28 million.

Unicef is the distributing partner of the programme, run with the GAVI vaccine

alliance.

India, the world's biggest vaccine maker, said on Friday it would make domestic Covid-19 inoculations a priority as infections surge, and had told international buyers of its decision.

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said on Friday that India's decision was "understandable" but that the WHO was in talks so it continues providing doses to other countries.

He urged countries to donate 10 million vaccine doses immediately to inoculate the most vulnerable in 20 poorer nations.

"Ten million doses is not much and it's not nearly enough," he said.

So far Covax has delivered 32 million vaccine doses to 61 countries, but 36 countries still await vaccines to start inoculations, Tedros said.



CHINESE VESSELS IN DISPUTED WATERS IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

Manila sends fighter jets

REUTERS, Manila

The Philippine military is sending light fighter aircraft to fly over hundreds of Chinese vessels in disputed waters in the South China Sea, its defence minister said, as he repeated his demand the flotilla be withdrawn immediately.

International concern is growing over what the Philippines has described as a "swarming and threatening presence" of more than 200 Chinese vessels that Manila believes were manned by maritime militia.

The boats were moored at the Whitsun Reef within Manila's 200-mile exclusive economic zone.

The Philippine military aircraft were sent daily to monitor the situation, Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana said in a statement late on Saturday.

Lorenzana said the military will also beef up its naval presence in the South China Sea to conduct "sovereignty patrols" and protect Filipino fishermen.

"Our air and sea assets are ready to protect our sovereignty and sovereign rights," Lorenzana said.

The Chinese Embassy in Manila did not immediately respond to a request for comment. It has said the vessels at Whitsun Reef were fishing boats taking refuge from rough seas and that there were no militia aboard.