

Quote of the day



“We have seen over the last decade or so what some call a democratic recession. We have seen the same challenges ... in many parts of the world -- misinformation, political violence, voter intimidation, voter bribery.”

US SECRETARY OF STATE  
**ANTONY BLINKEN** AS HE STARTS HIS THREE NATIONS AFRICA TOUR IN KENYA



Wife of Mudasir Gull is consoled by her relatives during a protest demanding the return of the body of Mudasir who, according to the police, was killed during a gun battle between militants and Indian security forces on Monday, in Srinagar, Kashmir yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

## Germany Covid-19 situation dramatic

Says Merkel; no curbs yet as France battles fifth wave of pandemic

REUTERS, Berlin

Germany's coronavirus situation is dramatic, Chancellor Angela Merkel said yesterday, calling for a push to distribute booster shots faster and appealing to those sceptical of vaccination to change their minds.

Germany reported 52,826 new infections yesterday - a jump of a third compared with a week ago and another daily record, while 294 people died, bringing the total to 98,274, as the pandemic's fourth wave tightened its grip on Europe.

"It is not too late to opt for a first vaccine shot," Merkel told a congress of German city mayors. "Everyone who gets vaccinated protects himself and others. And if enough people get vaccinated that is the way out of the pandemic."

Only 68 percent of people in Europe's most populous country are fully vaccinated - lower than the average in western Europe due to a tradition of vaccine hesitancy, while 5 percent of the population has had a booster shot.

Merkel also appealed to federal and regional leaders meeting today to introduce a measure that would trigger tighter restrictions based on the number of infected people who have to go to hospital in a week.

The Social Democrats, Greens and Free Democrats, who are negotiating to form the next government, are set to propose a range of measures to fight the pandemic.

Meanwhile, France is being hit by a fifth wave of Covid-19 infections but no extra restrictive measures to contain the spread of the disease are on the agenda for now, the government spokesperson Gabriel Attal said yesterday.

"The pandemic is spreading everywhere (...) but we are coping better than previously thanks to the vaccines and the health pass", Attal told reporters after a cabinet meeting.

## Release frozen Afghan assets

Taliban appeal to US Congress, warn economic turmoil at home could lead to trouble abroad; blast targetting Shias kills at least 2 in Kabul

AFP, Kabul

The Taliban yesterday called on US Congress members to release Afghan assets frozen after their takeover of the country, warning economic turmoil at home could lead to trouble abroad.

Meanwhile, highlighting the worsening security issue, a bomb blast that hit a minibus in Kabul yesterday killed at least two people and wounded five, the latest in a series of attacks in the Afghan capital.

No one has claimed responsibility for the latest attack, but the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) group has claimed responsibility for such attacks in the past.

In an open letter, Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi said the biggest challenge facing Afghanistan was financial insecurity, "and the roots of this concern lead back to the freezing of assets of our people by the American government".

Washington has seized nearly \$9.5 billion in assets belonging to the Afghan central bank, and the aid-dependent economy has effectively collapsed -- with civil servants unpaid for months and the treasury unable to pay for imports.

Concerned nations have pledged hundreds



of millions of dollars in aid, but are reluctant to commit funds unless the Taliban agree to a more inclusive government and to guarantee the rights of women and minorities.

"I present to you our compliments and would like to share a few thoughts on our bilateral relations," Muttaqi wrote, noting that 2021 was the centenary of Washington recognising Afghanistan's sovereignty.

Muttaqi said Afghanistan was enjoying stable government for the first time in over 40 years -- a period that started with an invasion by the Soviet Union in 1979 and ended with the withdrawal

of the last US troops on August 31.

From 1996 to 2001, the Taliban ruled Afghanistan with an iron fist, brutally violating human rights in the name of Islamic law, sparking fears of a return of their abuses.

The Taliban have since returning to power gone to great lengths to convince the international community that they intend to do things differently this time -- though no female ministers have been named, and girls are still barred from returning to secondary school.

Muttaqi said Afghans "understand the concerns of the international community", but that it was necessary for all sides to take positive steps to build trust.

He warned, however, that the economic situation could spark a mass exodus. "If the current situation prevails, the Afghan government and people will face problems and will become a cause for mass migration in the region and world which will consequently create further humanitarian and economic issues," he said.

Muttaqi said the United States risked further damaging its reputation in the country "and this will serve as the worst memory ingrained in Afghans at the hands of America".

## No US policy change

Biden clarifies remark about 'independent' Taiwan

AFP, North Woodstock

President Joe Biden on Tuesday clarified his apparent reference to an "independent" Taiwan, saying the US position on Chinese sovereignty has not changed.

Biden's latest in a series of mixed messages about the island -- a democracy outside of Beijing's control that China claims as part of its territory -- came the day after a virtual summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping.

Asked if they'd made progress on Taiwan, which has close unofficial relations with the United States, Biden said he "made very clear" his support for current US law.

Under the Taiwan Act, the United States does not recognize Taiwan's independence, yet commits to helping the island defend itself.

However, Biden, who was on a trip in New Hampshire, then told reporters: "It's independent. It makes its own decisions."

The White House did not respond to a request for clarification about what Biden was referring to. Biden himself then told reporters shortly after that he did not mean there was any change in US policy toward Taiwan.

"We're not going to change our policy at all," he said. "We are not encouraging independence. We're encouraging them to do exactly what the Taiwan Act requires. That's what we're doing. Let them make up their mind."

This was the third time Biden has recently appeared to contradict US policy, giving the impression of hardening his support for Taiwan. In October, when asked if the United States would come to Taiwan's defense against China, he said, "Yes, we have a commitment."

Biden made a similar comment in August. In both instances, the White House clarified later that US policy had not changed.

While the United States gives Taiwan assistance in its self-defense, it maintains what Washington calls "strategic ambiguity" over the question of whether US forces would ever intervene.

Speaking to reporters on Tuesday, Biden said he'd emphasized to Xi that while US naval ships would keep out of Chinese territorial waters, they would insist on the right to access the South China Sea and "we're not going to be intimidated."

### MORE NEWS



#### New York auction smashes record for Frida Kahlo work

A rare painting by Frida Kahlo sold in a New York auction house Tuesday for almost \$35 million, a record price for a work by the iconic Mexican artist. At the same sale, a painting by French artist Pierre Soulages also broke a record for his work by reaching \$20.2 million dollars. As expected, the self-portrait of Kahlo entitled "Diego y yo" ("Diego and me," 1949), where the face of the painter's husband Diego Rivera appears on her forehead, smashed the former record of \$8 million set by a Kahlo in 2016. That made it the most expensive Latin American work of art in history sold at auction.

#### Armenia, Azerbaijan say truce holds after deadly clashes

A Russian-brokered ceasefire was holding yesterday at the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, officials said, a day after deadly clashes between the arch-foes sparked fears of another flare-up in their territorial dispute. On Tuesday, clashes between Armenian and Azerbaijani troops left eight soldiers dead in the worst fighting since last year's war over the long-disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region. The six-week conflict, which claimed the lives of more than 6,500 people, ended last November in a Russia-mediated deal that saw Armenia cede swathes of territory it had controlled for decades.

#### Liverpool terror blast planned for 'at least' 7 months: police

The man who died in a botched bomb attack in the northern English city of Liverpool on Sunday had planned the blast for at least seven months, police said yesterday. Iraq-born Emad Al Swealmeen, 32, rented a property in the city in April and had made "relevant purchases" for his bomb since "at least" that time, said Russ Jackson, who heads counter-terrorism policing in northwest England. Al Swealmeen's improvised device went off in the back of a taxi outside a Liverpool hospital moments before Britain marked Remembrance Sunday last weekend. He was killed in the fireball, while the quick-thinking taxi driver escaped with minor injuries after reportedly locking Al Swealmeen inside his cab.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

## Sleaze row: UK PM faces grilling from lawmakers

AFP, London

Prime Minister Boris Johnson faces a parliamentary grilling yesterday over sleaze allegations, as tensions ran high within his Conservative party due to his proposals to ban MPs from paid political consultancy work.

With opposition parties on the attack and rank-and-file Tory MPs unhappy, the quizzing from the heads of parliament's cross-party select committees at 1500 GMT could be the least of his worries.

But he has tried to get on the front foot to tackle a simmering row about MPs supplementing their publicly funded salaries with lucrative second jobs, stoking claims about conflict of interest.

On Tuesday, he wrote to parliament's speaker to say he will back proposals to bar British lawmakers from acting as paid political consultants and advisers.

British lawmakers are permitted to hold outside roles, as long as they declare them, but are not allowed to use their parliamentary offices or resources for such work. Paid lobbying is also forbidden, with wrongdoing accusations probed by parliamentary standards watchdogs.

But Johnson's proposals, which appear to stop short of an outright ban on consultancy and advisory work, have been criticised as too vague, and still open to interpretation.

The current scandal mushroomed this month when Johnson tried -- and failed -- to overhaul how the watchdogs system operates after MP Owen Paterson faced suspension over lobbying ministers for two firms that had him on the payroll.

It soon emerged numerous other MPs had high-paying second jobs, in particular lawyer and former attorney general Geoffrey Cox. He has been accused of using his parliamentary office for outside legal work, which has netted him more than £6 million since becoming an MP in 2005, on top of his annual MP's salary -- currently around £82,000.

Paterson has resigned from parliament, while Cox denies breaking the rules.

## Comedian under nationalist fire over tale of 'two Indias'

AFP, New Delhi

An Indian comedian and actor has been forced to defend himself against online accusations of "insulting the country" after he performed a "two Indias" monologue in Washington.

Vir Das, one of India's top satirical performers, is known for his willingness to critically observe his country.

Critics say there has been rising intolerance against minority communities in India since Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power in 2014, and that freedom of speech is under threat in the world's biggest democracy.

"I come from an India where we worship women during the day and gang rape them at night," Das told a packed Washington, DC venue during his current world tour.

In an almost seven-minute long video posted Monday, he covered issues ranging from air pollution, journalism and Modi's coronavirus relief efforts to cricket.

"I come from an India where we bleed blue every time we play green," he said, referring to the sporting uniforms of his country and arch-rival Pakistan. "But every time we lose to green, we turn



orange all of a sudden."

Orange refers to muscular Hindu nationalism, often symbolised by the colour saffron.

"I come from an India that will watch this and know there is a gigantic joke. It just isn't funny," he said.

Soon after Das released the video social media users accused him of insulting India on the global stage, and at least two police complaints were filed against him.

Leading Indian actress Kangana Ranaut slammed Das, calling the video "soft terrorism" and writing on Instagram: "Strict action should be taken against such criminals."

Das took to Twitter insisting the video was a "satire about the duality of two separate Indias that do different things. 'Like any nation has light and dark, good and evil within it.'"

The backlash against Das is not the first time an Indian comic has come under fire from right-wing Hindu groups and activists. Comedian Munawar Faruqui was held in prison for more than a month after being accused of insulting Hindu gods and goddesses, and this month cancelled three shows in Mumbai after a Hindu right-wing group threatened to set the venue ablaze.



Migrants gather to receive humanitarian aid near Bruzgi - Kuznica checkpoint on the Belarusian-Polish border in the Grodno region, Belarus yesterday. Poland warned that the crisis on the Belarusian border could last for months or even years, a day after Polish forces used tear gas and water cannon to deter migrants. PHOTO: REUTERS

### APPROVAL OF EVM BILL IN PAKISTAN HOUSE

## Opposition slams it as polls rigging ploy

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan's parliament yesterday passed a law allowing electronic vote counting despite furious protests from the opposition which said it had been pushed through by the government to rig the next election.

Opposition members tore up copies of the law, chanted slogans and called Khan a vote thief before walking out.

"I believe that this is the blackest day of our parliamentary history. We condemn it," the leader of the opposition in parliament, Shehbaz Sharif, said.

The government secured 221 votes against the opposition's 203. The government has for months been trying to pass the law that will allow overseas Pakistanis to cast their ballot online.

Pakistan has a history of parties alleging vote rigging after every election.

The opposition and many political analysts say Khan is unlikely to secure another term. The government has been grappling with a chronic economic crisis and rising inflation is at odds with the military over the appointment of a new head of the Inter Services Intelligence spy agency.

The opposition alleges the military brought Khan to power in a rigged 2018 election, a charge both the government and the army deny.



NOVEMBER 18

**1626** - St. Peter's Basilica is consecrated, replacing an earlier basilica on the same site and becoming the world's largest Christian basilica.

**1993** - Black and white leaders in South Africa approved a new democratic constitution which gave blacks the vote.

**2004** - Russia formally ratified the Kyoto Protocol on global warming, clearing the way for the environment pact to come into force in February 2005.

SOURCE: REUTERS