



Heavy damage is seen downtown after a tornado swept through the area yesterday in Mayfield, Kentucky, US.

PHOTO: AFP

US democracy 'weapon of mass destruction'

Says China a day after Biden closes 2-day summit

AGENCIES

China yesterday branded US democracy a "weapon of mass destruction", following the US-organised Summit for Democracy which aimed to shore up like-minded allies in the face of autocratic regimes.

China was left out of the two-day virtual summit -- along with countries including Russia and Hungary -- and responded by angrily accusing US President Joe Biden of stoking Cold War-era ideological divides.

"Democracy has long become a 'weapon of mass destruction' used by the US to interfere in other countries," a foreign ministry spokesperson said in an online statement, which also accused the US of having "instigated 'colour revolutions'" overseas.

The ministry also claimed the summit was organised by the US to "draw lines of ideological prejudice, instrumentalise and weaponise democracy... (and) incite division and confrontation."

Instead, Beijing vowed to "resolutely resist and oppose all kinds of pseudo-democracies".

In closing comments to leaders from scores of countries, as well as representatives of NGOs and philanthropic bodies,

Biden on Friday said democracy "knows no borders. It speaks every language. It lives in anti-corruption activists, human rights defenders, journalists."

"We're committed to working with all those who share those values to shape the rules of the road," Biden vowed, saying the United States will stand by those "who give their people the ability to breathe free and not seek to suffocate their people with an iron hand."

On the first day of the virtual summit, he pledged \$424 million to support media freedom, fair elections and anti-corruption campaigns.

While the US has repeatedly denied there will be another Cold War with China, tensions between the world's two largest economies have spiralled in recent years over issues including trade and technological competition, human rights, Xinjiang and Taiwan.

The US Treasury on Friday sanctioned two high-level Chinese officials for human rights abuses in the Xinjiang region and placed Chinese AI surveillance firm SenseTime on a blacklist for its facial recognition technology targeting the Uyghur minority.



More than 50 killed as storms batter US

Around 100 trapped in Illinois Amazon warehouse

AFP, Washington

At least 50 people are dead after a tornado ripped through the southeastern US state of Kentucky, its governor told reporters, as storms ravaged large swathes of the country.

Several counties in Kentucky were devastated, with the strongest tornado tearing 200 miles through the state, governor Andy Beshear said.

"I fear that there are more than 50 dead ... probably closer to somewhere between 70 and 100, it's devastating," he said, adding this was the "most severe tornado event in Kentucky's history".

The governor said a roof collapse at a candle factory "resulted in mass casualties" in the city of Mayfield.

"Before midnight I declared a state of emergency," Beshear said.

The tornado came as storms wreaked havoc in multiple US states.

A storm earlier tore through a massive

Amazon warehouse in the US state of Illinois on Friday, officials said, with local media reporting around 100 workers trapped inside.

Officials were working through the early hours of Saturday to rescue employees at the facility -- a third of which was reduced to rubble -- who were on the night shift processing orders ahead of the Christmas holidays.

The Collinsville Emergency Management Agency described it as a "mass casualty incident" with "multiple subjects trapped at Amazon Warehouse".

A tornado warning had been in effect in the area at the time of the incident.

In Arkansas, one person was killed and 20 others were trapped after a tornado struck the Monette Manor nursing home, US media reported. In Tennessee, at least two people were killed in storm-related incidents, an emergency management official told local media.

West will counter 'aggressors'

Says UK, calls for unity against Russia, China threats as G7 ministers, allies meet

AFP, Liverpool

The West and its allies need to be united against authoritarianism, UK Foreign Secretary Liz Truss said yesterday, as she hosted G7 counterparts with concern about threats from Russia and China.

The two-day gathering of foreign ministers from the world's richest nations in Liverpool, northwest England, is the last in-person gathering of Britain's year-long G7 presidency, before it hands over the baton to Germany.

Russia's build-up of troops on Ukraine's border is top of the agenda, alongside discussions on confronting China, limiting Iran's nuclear ambitions and addressing the crisis in military-ruled Myanmar.

"We need to come together strongly to stand up to aggressors who are seeking to limit the bounds of freedom and democracy," Truss said as she formally opened the talks, without mentioning specific countries.

"To do this, we need to have a fully united voice. We need to expand our economic and security posture around the world."

Truss held talks on the sidelines of the summit on Friday with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken as well as Germany's new Foreign



Minister Annalena Baerbock.

Blinken flies on to Southeast Asia next week on a visit designed to highlight the region's importance in Washington's strategy of standing up to an increasingly assertive China in the region.

Ministers from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) will join the G7 summit for the first time ever today, in a session earmarked for wide-ranging talks on issues including Covid-19 vaccines, finance and gender equality.

South Korea, Australia, South Africa and India will also participate as Britain's chosen G7 "guests", with many attendees taking part virtually due to the pandemic and emergence of

the Omicron variant.

Truss, who replaced Dominic Raab as Britain's top diplomat in September, delivered her first major foreign policy address Wednesday as crises loom around the world.

She warned Moscow it would be "a strategic mistake" to invade Ukraine, following growing concerns over a big Russian troop build-up on the border.

At a G7 leaders' summit in June, Biden pushed for a stronger collective stance towards both China and Russia, and this week saw Washington, London and Canberra announce diplomatic boycotts of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics.

Truss said the West needs to work towards ending the "strategic dependence" of a growing number of low- and middle-income countries on its adversaries, in various areas from energy to technology.

At the summit she will push attendees to provide those countries with more finance for infrastructure and technology projects, according to the foreign office.

G7 countries and their allies must offer "an alternative to unsustainable debt from non-market economies" like China, it said.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

DECEMBER 12

1901 - Guglielmo Marconi sends the first transatlantic radio signal, from Poldhu in Cornwall to Newfoundland, Canada.

2000 - US Supreme Court releases its decision in Bush v. Gore, settling the recount dispute in Florida's 2000 presidential election in George W Bush's favor and thus handing him the presidency.

2015 - COP21 climate change summit in Paris reaches a deal between 195 countries to limit the rise in the global average temperature to less than 2°C above pre-industrial levels.

SOURCE: REUTERS

Mexico urges US migration rethink after crash kills 55

AFP, Tuxtla Gutiérrez

Mexico has urged Washington to rethink its migration policy after a horror road accident killed 55 undocumented migrants in a truck on a major transit route to the United States.

Bodies draped in white sheets lined the roadside near Tuxtla Gutiérrez in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas, where a truck transporting some 160 migrants -- most from Central America -- overturned Thursday.

Passengers, bleeding and with broken bones, lay in the road crying out in pain after the latest disaster to befall desperate people traveling through Mexico in search of a better life in the United States.

More than 100 people were injured.

Thousands attempt the long, often dangerous, and expensive journey every year to escape violence and poverty in their home nations in South and Central America.

Such tragedies, Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador said Friday, should move the world to address "the underlying problem" -- despair.

"The migration problem cannot be solved by coercive measures, but by opportunities for work and well-being. People don't leave

their villages for pleasure, they do it out of necessity," he said.

If the United States wanted to prevent migration to its shores, added Lopez Obrador, it should invest in social programs in Central America -- a matter he has discussed with Joe Biden.

But "there is slowness," said the Mexican leader.

The victims of Thursday's accident, authorities said, were from Guatemala, Honduras, Ecuador, the Dominican Republic and Mexico.

The driver, who fled the scene, was allegedly speeding when he lost control of the truck.

The National Institute of Migration said it was working to identify the dead, pay for funerals and repatriate bodies. It said survivors will be allowed to stay in Mexico.

The death toll is likely to rise, with many of the injured taken to hospital in a serious condition, according to Luis Manuel Garcia, a local civil protection official.

The Attorney General's Office has opened a homicide investigation.

Guatemalan authorities declared three days of national mourning, and the Vatican expressed condolences to the victims and their loved ones.



Policemen remove Tibetan activists from the Students for a Free Tibet association, as they perform a sit-in at the entrance of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) headquarters ahead of the February's Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics, yesterday in Lausanne, Switzerland. The United Nations' human rights office is finalising its assessment of the situation in China's Xinjiang region, where Uyghurs are alleged to have been unlawfully detained, mistreated and forced to work, a spokesperson said on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

XMAS PARTY, LIES AND VIDEOTAPE

Is it curtains for Boris Johnson?

AFP, London

At the British general election in December 2019, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson campaigned on a pledge to "Get Brexit Done" -- and won by a landslide.

But just two years on, Johnson's once seemingly unassailable position is looking shaky after a series of scandals have left his credibility in tatters.

In opinion polls and even among members of his ruling Conservative party, there is open talk that he should quit -- or be forced out by an internal vote of no confidence.

"So far he's been Teflon. Virtually nothing has touched him," Robin Pettitt, a specialist in British politics, told AFP.

But he said a succession of scandals and sleaze allegations "adds up over time".

"There's been so many of them that eventually it's going to overflow," he added.

There has been mounting public anger at reports that Johnson's staff broke coronavirus rules last year by holding a Christmas party in Downing Street at a time when the public were told to cancel their festive plans.

Johnson's repeated denials of wrongdoing, however, have failed to convince, after video footage emerged of his staff apparently joking that they knew it was a breach.



With his mop of unruly blond hair and ill-fitting suits, Johnson has long played up to his image as an unconventional politician. And it has been effective.

His simple Brexit pitch won over voters in the heartlands of the main opposition Labour party in northern England, giving him a whopping 80-seat majority in parliament.

Even after a much-criticised start -- and a still staggeringly high Covid death toll and infection rate -- he has enjoyed a bounce from a successful vaccination campaign.

But his characteristic bluster does not seem to be enough this time.

A YouGov poll for The Times on Friday suggested 68pc of respondents believed he was lying when he denied the rules were broken. And

his overall popularity has plunged to an all-time low in other polls, showing Labour in a rare lead.

Political scientist Steven Fielding said that, with the new Omicron strain threatening Britain, Brexit not as "done" as he claims and the economy stumbling, Johnson is not in a good place.

Johnson, 57, has long been accused of bending the truth.

As a fledgling journalist, he was sacked from The Times for making up a quote. He went on to peddle "euromyths" as Brussels correspondent for the Daily Telegraph.

But if the public were prepared to overlook his bumbling eccentricities, they may be less forgiving of claims of dodgy dealing and cronyism.

An inquiry this week fined Johnson's Tory party for failing to declare who paid for the lavish refurbishment of his Downing Street flat -- a scandal dubbed "cash for curtains".

He has also been condemned for trying to change parliament's disciplinary procedure after Tory MP Owen Paterson was caught lobbying ministers illegally and quit.

According to Pettitt, Johnson's supporters have tolerated his style as long as he has delivered.

But he warned: "If he starts to look like he's not a winner, then they'll fall out of love with him very quickly."

South Korea green-lights plans for 'floating city'

CNN ONLINE

The South Korean city of Busan has green-lit plans for an ambitious new ocean settlement, with work on the first neighborhood set to begin next year.

Comprising a series of interconnected platforms, the proposed "floating city" could eventually accommodate 10,000 people, according to its designers, offering coastal areas a drastic solution to the threat posed by rising sea levels.

The Oceanix project, a collaboration between designers, architects and engineers, unveiled plans for a "flood-proof" city in 2019 -- and organizers have since been looking for somewhere to build prototypes.

Last month, the group signed an agreement with Busan and UN-Habitat, the United Nations' urban development agency, to host the first of its floating neighborhoods off South Korea's coast.

Prefabricated in factories and then towed into position, the proposed platforms will rise and fall with the sea. Each of the five-acre neighborhoods has been designed to house 300 people in buildings up to seven stories high.



Ultimately, these communities could be arranged into larger networks, connected via walkways and bicycle paths. According to Bjarke Ingels Group, the Danish architecture firm leading the design, the neighborhoods could be clustered around a central harbor to form larger 1,650-person villages.

These villages could then, in theory, join to form a wider 10,000-person metropolis -- dubbed Oceanix City -- complete with everything from restaurants and co-working spaces to urban farms and leisure facilities.

The proposed settlement has been envisaged as "self-sustaining," with residents able produce their own food and energy in "zero waste closed-loop systems."