

UK Queen marks 70 yrs on throne

REUTERS, London

Queen Elizabeth marks 70 years on the British throne today, a milestone never reached by any of her predecessors over the last 1,000 years, and one which only a few monarchs across the globe have ever achieved.

Elizabeth, 95, became the queen of Britain and more than a dozen other realms including Canada, Australia and New Zealand on the death of her father King George VI on Feb 6, 1952, while she was in Kenya on an international tour.

The news was broken to her by her husband Prince Philip, who died last year aged 99 after more than seven decades by her side.

Elizabeth will mark 'Accession Day' in private as is customary, not viewing it as something to celebrate. But there will be four days of national events to mark her Platinum Jubilee in June.

In 2015, she overtook Victoria as Britain's longest-reigning sovereign in a line that traces its origin back to Norman King William I and his 1066 conquest of England.

When she ascended the throne, Josef Stalin, Mao Zedong and Harry Truman were running the Soviet Union, China and the United States, respectively, while Winston Churchill was British prime minister.

Including Churchill, she has been served by 14 prime ministers - a quarter of all there have been in Britain since Robert Walpole 300 years ago. During her reign, there have been 14 US presidents, all of whom she has met bar Lyndon Johnson.



Truckers and supporters continue to protest Covid-19 vaccine mandates and restrictions in Ottawa, Canada, on Friday. Hundreds of truckers drove their giant rigs into the Canadian capital on January 29, 2022, as part of a self-titled "Freedom Convoy" to protest vaccine mandates required to cross the US border. PHOTO: REUTERS

BACKING MOSCOW AGAINST WEST Xi upends Biden's strategic calculus

AFP, Paris

China's support for Russia in the standoff over Ukraine upends the strategic calculus for US President Joe Biden, who must now contend with a second front in a geopolitical fight whose ramifications could be felt worldwide.

By jointly lashing out Friday at Washington's alleged destabilising policies in both Eastern Europe and the Asia-Pacific region, Beijing and Moscow indicated that sanctions alone would not deter their bids to play larger roles on the global stage.

Appearing publicly as the Beijing Olympics opened, Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping showed an "enhanced commitment to make the world safe for authoritarianism, in particular in former socialist countries," said Steve Tsang, a political scientist at the SOAS University of London.

And for Xi, taking a public stand on Ukraine demonstrates "his shared interest with Putin to challenge the US-dominated world order", Tsang told AFP.

Official Chinese media outlets have been playing up the frequent encounters between Xi and Putin since Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, which saw the Russian leader largely blacklisted by the West.

China's Global Times noted recently that "besides the official meetings, the two also shared some close moments like enjoying vodka, caviar and Russian ice cream and celebrating each other's birthdays".

"We know that both Russia and China value sovereignty above anything else, so alliance is still too strong of a word," said Anton Barbashin, an analyst at the Riddle think-tank in Glasgow, Scotland.

"But we are definitely going to see more coordinated action in international

relations, maybe simultaneous campaigns in Europe and Asia, as well as deepening economic ties between Moscow and Beijing," he told AFP.

And the Ukraine crisis gives Xi a chance to riposte indirectly to Biden's avowed focus of containing China's ambitions in the Asia-Pacific, as evidenced by the recent US-Australia defence pact and nuclear submarines deal.

"It increases Russia's relative importance for China -- Xi couldn't have provoked Biden nor Europe this openly," said Pascal

Putin that Russia was only a regional power -- he wants to show that Russia plays a central role, and he's succeeding," Ausseur said.

The payoff for China, meanwhile, could be in its own backyard: More US troops focussing on Ukraine and other Eastern European nations means less military weight to compete with Beijing in the Pacific.

The US response to Moscow on any Ukraine invasion, for example, could weigh heavily on any Chinese move to take



Ausseur, a former French navy admiral and director of the Mediterranean Foundation of Strategic Studies.

"And Putin showed Xi that he knows how to take geopolitical and military risks, which Beijing must have appreciated," he said.

Putin is using the threat to invade Ukraine to demand a halt to Nato expansion and what it calls "Cold War" ideologies, and now has Beijing's explicit support in the showdown.

"Don't forget that Barack Obama told

control of Taiwan, whose independence Washington has signalled it would defend.

Both Russia and China would also seize on any apparent US backdown over Ukraine to portray Washington as an unreliable partner, a potent argument as both countries look to spread their global influence, in particular in Africa.

"If the United States chooses retrenchment rather than its traditional global leadership role, both Russia and China could try to fill the void," Pezard said.



Bystanders watch as Moroccan emergency teams work to rescue Rayan in the remote village of Ighrane in the rural northern province of Chefchaouen, on Friday. PHOTO: AFP

PHOTO: AFP

Saving little #Rayan

AFP, Bab Berred

Moroccan rescuers worked through the night into yesterday, the fifth day of an increasingly urgent and nerve-wracking effort to rescue Rayan, a five-year-old boy trapped underground in a well.

The complex, slow and risky earth-moving operation has gripped residents of the North African kingdom and even sparked sympathy in neighbouring Algeria, a regional rival.

Rayan accidentally fell about 32 metres (35 yards) down the tight, empty shaft near his home in the remote village of Ighrane in Chefchaouen province on Tuesday afternoon.

Rescue crews, using bulldozers and front-end loaders, have dug almost all the way down but the final two metres are the most difficult because of the risk of landslides.

There has been no information about the fate of the boy, but the more time that passes, the more fears arise over whether he will be recovered alive.

Overnight, crews manoeuvred a heavy pipe into position in the area. "We're almost there," said one of the operation's leaders, Abdesalam Makoudi.

A glacial cold has gripped this mountainous and impoverished region of Rif, which is at an

elevation of about 700 metres.

On Thursday Moroccan media reported that rescuers managed to deliver oxygen and water to the bottom of the well.

Thousands of people gathered around the site, surrounded by olive trees, where AFP reporters said the tension was palpable. Some applauded to encourage the rescuers.

The shaft, just 45 centimetres (18 inches) across, was too narrow to reach Rayan, and widening it was deemed too risky -- so earth-movers dug a wide slope into the hill to reach him from the side.

The operation has made the landscape resemble a construction site. It involves engineers and topographers, and was made more complex by the mix of rocky and sandy soils.

Red-helmeted Civil Defence personnel have at times been suspended by rope, as if on a cliff face.

"I keep up hope that my child will get out of the well alive," Rayan's father told public television 2M on Friday evening. "I thank everyone involved and those supporting us in Morocco and elsewhere."

"Rescuers are literally in the process of moving a mountain to save little #Rayan. I hope that their efforts will not be in vain and that those who prayed for him will see their prayers answered," one internet user wrote.



DIPLOMATIC BLITZ Xi hosts banquet for world leaders

AFP, Beijing

Chinese President Xi Jinping hosted a banquet yesterday for heads of state and international organisations attending the Winter Olympics, part of a diplomatic blitz following nearly two years without face-to-face meetings due to the pandemic.

Beijing is keen to shore up international support and pull off a Games that will burnish its reputation, despite multiple countries including the United States, Australia, Britain and Canada announcing diplomatic boycotts over China's rights record.

Besides Russian President Vladimir Putin, the banquet guestlist included Kazakhstan President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan, Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el Sisi and Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, as well as a handful of leaders from Europe and Asia Pacific, according to Chinese state media.

State broadcaster CCTV said International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach and UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres also gave speeches praising China's management of the Olympics and handling of the pandemic.

LOYALTY TO TRUMP GOP convention exposes fissure

AFP, Washington

Republicans' deep divisions over the 2020 US election were laid bare Friday as the party censured two lawmakers investigating the deadly Capitol assault aimed at stopping its certification -- only to see Donald Trump rebuked by Mike Pence for claiming falsely that his former vice president could have overturned the results.

An extraordinary split-screen began when Liz Cheney and Adam Kinzinger found themselves rebuked by the Republican National Committee (RNC) over their roles on the

House select committee probing Trump's involvement in the January 6, 2021 insurrection.

Just hours after the RNC met in Utah, Pence delivered an address in Florida rejecting Trump's claims that the former Indiana senator could have overruled vote tallies in swing states as he oversaw the congressional certification of Joe Biden's victory.

"President Trump is wrong. I had no right to overturn the election," Pence said at a Federalist Society event in Orlando. "The presidency belongs to the American people and the American people alone."

Trump, who retains his iron grip on the party despite losing in 2020, is expected to run for the 2024 Republican nomination, potentially against Pence.

US Covid death toll tops 900,000

AFP, Washington

The US death toll from the Covid-19 pandemic surpassed 900,000 on Friday, according to the Johns Hopkins University coronavirus tracker. The toll had hit 800,000 dead in mid-December, just a month and a half ago. New cases linked to the Omicron variant are falling, but daily deaths are still rising, with an average of 2,400 now, according to government figures. Covid deaths usually occur a few weeks after patients get the virus, which explains why the spike in deaths occurs later than the spike in new cases. The Covid pandemic has killed at least 5.7 million people worldwide since it began in December 2019, according to an AFP tally published on Friday.

Peru PM sacked over 'domestic violence'

AFP, Lima

Peruvian President Pedro Castillo dumped his prime minister Friday just three days after appointing him, amid outrage over revelations he was accused of domestic violence in 2016. "I have decided to recompose the cabinet," the president said, meaning Prime Minister Hector Valer Pinto is out. Valer Pinto, 62, first came under pressure Thursday when newspapers reported that in 2016 his wife and university-age daughter reported him for domestic violence. Valer Pinto responded to the news reports by denying he was an "abuser" and said he was never convicted of domestic violence.

