

Sri Lanka bans strikes as unions cripple govt hospitals

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's president banned strikes in the health and electricity sectors yesterday as trade union action that has crippled state-run hospitals entered its sixth day.

President Gotabaya Rajapaksa invoked a 1979 law prohibiting stoppages in the two sectors, declaring all related work "essential public services", his office said.

The tough regulations allow courts to hand down five-year jail terms and confiscate the assets of those refusing work. The move followed health unions ignoring a court order Thursday instructing them to suspend their strike pending a hearing of a petition against their action.

Sri Lanka is in the grip of a foreign exchange crisis that has crippled the economy, and the unions are demanding better promotional prospects, restructuring of their pay scales and higher allowances.

The government has refused, saying the current economic situation did not allow it to increase the salaries budget.

Thousands of health workers have been taking part in the strike action, leaving only emergency services functioning at state hospitals and many routine services put off.

Electricity sector workers are not on strike, but they too have threatened trade union action if the government goes ahead with plans to sell a thermal power plant to a US company.



Thousands of protesters march towards the parliament building in Canberra, Australia, yesterday, to decry Covid-19 vaccine mandates, the latest in a string of rallies against pandemic restrictions around the world. A French "freedom convoy" of cars and vans began arriving in Paris yesterday for a protest over coronavirus restrictions, but the police moved quickly to prevent a Canadian-style blockade of the capital by issuing hundreds of fines.

PHOTO: AFP

Biden seizes Afghan funds

Seeks to split \$7 billion in assets between aid and 9/11 victims

AFP, Washington

US President Joe Biden seized \$7 billion in assets belonging to the previous Afghan government Friday, aiming to split the funds between victims of the 9/11 attacks and desperately needed aid for post-war Afghanistan.

The move drew an angry response from the country's new leaders the Taliban, which branded the seizure a "theft" and a sign of US "moral decay."

Biden's unusual action saw the conflicting, highly sensitive issues of a humanitarian tragedy in Afghanistan, the fundamentalist Taliban fight for recognition, and the push for justice from families impacted by the September 11, 2001 attacks collide, with billions of dollars at stake.

The first stage was simple: Biden formally blocked the assets in an executive

order signed Friday.

The money -- which a US official said largely stems from foreign assistance once sent to help the now defunct Western-backed Afghan government -- had been stuck in the New York Federal Reserve ever since last year's Taliban victory.

The insurgency, which fought US-led forces for 20 years and now controls the whole country, has not been recognized by Washington or any Western countries, mostly over its human rights record.

However, with appalling poverty gripping Afghanistan, Washington is seeking ways to assist, while side-stepping the Taliban. The White House said Biden will seek to funnel \$3.5 billion of the frozen funds into a humanitarian aid trust "for the benefit of the Afghan people and for Afghanistan's future."

The trust fund will manage the aid in a way that bypasses Taliban

authorities, a senior US official told reporters, countering likely criticism in Washington that Biden's administration is inadvertently boosting its former enemy.

The Taliban fumed over Washington's move. Failure and victory are common throughout history, "but the greatest and most shameful defeat is when moral defeat combines with military defeat," Taliban spokesman Mohammad Naeem said on Twitter.

Some relatives of 9/11 attack victims however expressed disappointment with Biden's move, saying Afghanistan should retain access to the money.

"Their country has been devastated. As a 9/11 family member I believe all available funds should go to Afghan relief," Sandra Bodley, whose 20-year-old niece Deora died on hijacked Flight 93 which crashed in a field in Pennsylvania, told AFP.

KARNATAKA HIJAB ROW

India rejects US criticism

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

India yesterday reacted sharply to the comments coming from some countries on the hijab controversy in the southern state of Karnataka and said "motivated comments" on its internal issues "are not welcome". India's Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Arindam Bagchi said the matter was under judicial examination by the High Court of Karnataka. "Our constitutional framework and mechanisms, as well as our democratic ethos and polity, are the context in which issues are considered and resolved. Those who know India well would have a proper appreciation of these realities. Motivated comments on our internal issues are not welcome," he said. On Friday, the US Ambassador At Large for International Religious Freedom had said Karnataka should not ban hijab in schools as it "violates religious freedom". Protests over the hijab issue spread beyond Karnataka's educational institutions to other cities like Aligarh, Hyderabad and Vijayawada on Friday, according to a PTI report.

China conditionally okays Pfizer Covid pill

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday said it had given "conditional" approval for Pfizer's Covid-19 drug Paxlovid to treat adults with mild to moderate illness and a high risk of developing severe disease. The drug has so far been authorised in about 40 countries including the United States and Israel, while the European Union has permitted member states to use it ahead of formal approval as an emergency measure against the rapidly spreading Omicron variant. Unlike Covid-19 vaccines, Pfizer says that preliminary studies show that Paxlovid does not target the ever-evolving spike protein the coronavirus uses to invade cells, meaning it should theoretically be more variant-proof. China's National Medical Products Administration yesterday said further research on the drug needed to be undertaken and submitted to the regulator. Beijing has not yet approved any foreign-made coronavirus vaccines. Earlier this week, Pfizer, whose vaccine developed with Germany's BioNTech was the first approved in the US, forecast more than \$50 billion in 2022 sales for its coronavirus jab and therapeutic treatment.



Relatives gather around a bus carrying prisoners outside the Insein prison after their released in Yangon, yesterday. Myanmar's junta yesterday announced an amnesty for more than 800 prisoners, as it held a parade and show of force in the capital to mark the country's Union Day.

PHOTO: AFP

30 nations commit to protect oceans

AFP, Brest

Around 30 government chiefs committed Friday to protect the world's oceans from harmful human activities at a summit in French port city of Brest, aiming to coordinate through a year packed with international action on the sea.

The gathering of heads of state and other senior officials as well as companies "has allowed us to firm up many commitments and new coalitions of public and private actors and states," French President Emmanuel Macron said.

Priorities included a hoped-for global treaty on protecting biodiversity in the high seas -- waters lying outside any one country's jurisdiction -- and action to prevent plastic pollution.

The European Union's 27 member states and 16 other countries formed a coalition to reach a high seas agreement this year, Macron's office said after the

meeting.

"We are so close, but we need to push" to get the treaty signed in 2022, European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen told the Brest summit.

After coronavirus delays, the hope is for a fourth and final round of UN negotiations to reach agreement in New York in March. "This is a timely and important commitment to protect our global commons," Peggy Kalas of the High Seas Alliance said in a statement.

But Francois Chartier of Greenpeace France said that activists "expect concrete measures on conservation mechanisms and governance" of any future treaties.

Although 30 more countries also signed up to the "High Ambition Coalition for Nature" launched in January 2021, which aims to protect 30 percent of the world's land and sea by 2030, "clarifications are also lacking on the level of protection for marine areas covered," Chartier said.

Other attendees in Brest included US climate envoy John Kerry and Egyptian President Fattah al Sisi.

And Portuguese President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa spoke ahead of a UN oceans summit in Lisbon in June.

The US will support opening talks at the UN for an international deal on plastic pollution, throwing their weight alongside the EU nations and around 10 other countries.

Other issues raised by speakers in Brest included greenhouse-gas emissions by cargo ships and other vessels at sea, which are not covered by the 2015 Paris Agreement.

And Macron called for an end to government subsidies encouraging overfishing, which is already being discussed at the World Trade Organisation.

France also announced that it would enlarge the natural reserve in its Antarctic territory in the southern Indian Ocean.

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