



Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman review a guard of honour during a welcome ceremony at the Presidential Palace in Ankara, Turkey, yesterday. Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler took another step out of his international isolation by paying his first visit to Turkey since the 2018 murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the kingdom's Istanbul consulate. The talks in Ankara come one month before US President Joe Biden visits Riyadh for a regional summit focused on the energy crunch caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Erdogan's decision to revive ties with one of his biggest rivals is also driven in large part by economics and trade, analysts say.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## GUN SAFETY MEASURES IN US Lawmakers agree bipartisan bill

AFP, Washington

US senators unveiled a bill Tuesday addressing the epidemic of gun violence plaguing the country as they locked down a narrow set of reforms that were nevertheless hailed as the first significant firearms controls in a generation.

The cross-party group, which had been working for weeks on the wording of the legislation, voiced confidence that it would have enough support to pass the Senate, and it could be signed into law by President Joe Biden as soon as next week.

The limited proposals don't go as far as reforms called for by Biden, such as an all-out ban on assault rifles.

But Chris Murphy, the senator leading negotiations for Democrats, hailed the bill as the "most significant piece of anti-gun violence legislation in nearly 30 years."

"This bill is going to save thousands of lives," he tweeted.

The lawmakers had been up against the clock -- aware that any delay risked losing the sense of urgency ignited by the fatal shooting of 19 children in Uvalde, Texas and of 10 Black people at a supermarket in Buffalo, upstate New York, both last month.

The last significant federal gun control legislation was passed in 1994, banning the manufacture for civilian use of assault rifles and large capacity ammunition clips.

But it expired a decade later and there has been no serious effort at reform since, despite rising gun violence.

A cross-party group of senators agreed on a framework on June 12 that includes enhanced background checks for buyers aged under 21, \$11 billion in funding for mental health and \$2 billion for school safety programs.

The blueprint also calls for funding to incentivize states to implement "red flag" laws to remove firearms from people considered a threat.

However the National Rifle Association, America's powerful gun rights lobby, rejected the deal.

"We will oppose this gun control legislation because it falls short at every level," the NRA said in a statement. "It does little to truly address violent crime while opening the door to unnecessary burdens on the exercise of Second Amendment freedom by law-abiding gun owners."

The House -- which is also off next week -- would likely stay in session into the weekend or bring representatives back during the break to send the legislation to Biden.



## Crisis-hit Lanka plans donor conference

Seeks support from 'historic allies' China, India, Japan



REUTERS, Colombo

Sri Lanka will call China, India and Japan to a donor conference to drum up more foreign assistance and present an interim budget in August, the prime minister said yesterday, amid ongoing negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The island nation of 22 million people is struggling with its worst economic crisis in seven decades, unable to import essentials including food, fuel and medicines because of a severe shortage of foreign exchange.

An interim budget will be presented in August, seeking to put public finances on a more sustainable path and increase funds to the poor who have been hardest hit, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe told parliament.

"The interim budget will set the path forward. This, together with an IMF programme and debt sustainability, will lay the foundation for Sri Lanka to return to economic stability," he said.

In late May, Wickremesinghe had told Reuters he would present an interim budget within six weeks, cutting government spending down "to the bone".

The dearth of basic necessities and spiralling inflation has stroked public unrest, pushing Wickremesinghe's government to redouble efforts to bring in assistance from the likes of the IMF and friendly countries.

"We need the support of India, Japan and China who have been historic allies. We plan to convene a donor conference with the involvement of these countries to find solutions for Sri Lanka's crisis," Wickremesinghe told parliament.

"We will also seek help from the US," he said, adding that his administration will use \$70 million from the World Bank for buying cooking gas, which has been in short supply, setting off sporadic protests.

A high-level delegation from India will arrive on Thursday for talks on additional support from New Delhi, and a team from the US Treasury will visit next week, Wickremesinghe said.

India has so far provided around \$4 billion worth of assistance, the prime minister said, including a \$400 million swap and credit lines totalling \$1.5 billion.

China, which has traditionally jostled with New Delhi for influence over the Indian Ocean island, is considering an appeal from Sri Lanka to renegotiate the terms of a yuan-denominated swap worth \$1.5 billion to fund essential imports.

The government also delayed publication of its first quarter GDP data, due on Wednesday, because its census and statistics department did not receive all required inputs on time, an official said.

"We are working to get the growth numbers out as soon as possible but it will probably take a few days due to delays and staff shortages," said Anura Kumara, director general of the Census and Statistics Department.

Sri Lanka, which suspended payment on \$12 billion of foreign debt in April, is seeking around \$3 billion from the IMF to put its public finances on track and access bridge financing.

## France is facing a new Covid wave

REUTERS, Paris

France is facing a new wave of Covid-19 infections fuelled by new variants of the disease, French vaccination chief Alain Fischer said yesterday, as daily new cases reached an almost two-month peak the day before at more than 95,000.

Speaking on France 2 television, he said there was no doubt there was once again an upsurge of the pandemic in the country, adding he was personally in favour of reinstating mandatory face mask wearing on public transport.

Other European countries, especially Portugal, are also seeing an increase, due two new Omicron subvariants BA.4 and BA.5, which, according to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, are likely to become dominant in the region.

The variants do not appear to carry a higher risk of severe disease than other forms of Omicron but as they are somewhat more infectious than the latter, it could lead to an increase in hospitalisations and deaths, the ECDC said.

There is traditionally a two-week delay between cases and hospitalisation trends and then a similar delay regarding Covid-deaths.

New infections have been steadily rising since the end of May in France, with the seven-day moving average of daily new cases almost tripling between the May 27 figure of 17,705 and Tuesday's 50,402.

That total is nonetheless still seven times lower than the 366,179 record reached at the start of the year.

France's Covid death toll rose by 56 over 24 hours on Tuesday, to reach 149,162.

## US embassy in Moscow gets new address, named after Donbas region

AFP, Moscow

Authorities in Moscow said on Wednesday that they have changed the official address of the US embassy building in the Russian capital to one named after pro-Kremlin separatists in Ukraine. "The United States embassy in Russia has a new official address," Moscow city hall said in a statement, saying it had named a previously unnamed open area in front of the embassy's main entrance. It said the embassy is now located at 1 Donetsk People's Republic Square, referring to a breakaway region in eastern Ukraine that Moscow recognised as independent shortly before sending troops there. The embassy's previous address was 8 Bolshoi Devyatinsky Lane. The new address was chosen in a public vote in which nearly 280,000 people participated, the city hall said. In February 2018, a street outside the Russian embassy in Washington was named after Boris Nemtsov, an opposition politician who was shot dead outside the Kremlin in 2015.

## Pick a 'courageous' human rights chief NGOs urge UN

GENEVA, Switzerland



Rights groups yesterday appealed for the next UN rights chief to be appointed through a swift, open process, calling for a "courageous" nominee to stand up to powerful countries. More than 60 non-governmental organisations, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, sent an open letter to United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres about what they hoped to see in the next high commissioner for human rights. Michelle Bachelet said last week she would not stand for a second term after her mandate ends on August 31, but so far there has been no indication from Guterres on who he has in mind to fill the position. The organisations emphasised the kind of candidate they would like to see, hinting they would prefer a break with Bachelet's discreet, diplomatic style. Bachelet has faced significant criticism over her reluctance to publicly admonish countries, including China, over alleged rights abuses.

## A powerful blow to the tobacco industry

US seeks to reduce nicotine to non-addictive levels in cigarettes

AFP, Washington

President Joe Biden's administration on Tuesday announced it would develop a new policy requiring cigarette producers to reduce nicotine to non-addictive levels -- a move that would deal a powerful blow to the tobacco industry.

If successful in its aims, the new US standard could save millions of lives by the end of the century, and shape a future where cigarettes are no longer responsible for addiction and debilitating disease.

The initiative requires the Food and Drug Administration to develop and then publish a rule,

which will likely be contested by industry.

"Nicotine is powerfully addictive," said FDA Commissioner Robert Califf in a statement. "Making cigarettes and other combusted tobacco products minimally addictive or non-addictive would help save lives."

The process is expected to take several years and could be delayed or derailed by litigation, or reversed by a future administration sympathetic to the tobacco lobby.

Nicotine is the "feel good" chemical that hooks people to cigarettes, chewing tobacco,

vaping devices and other tobacco products.

Thousands of other chemicals contained in tobacco and its smoke are responsible for diseases such as cancer, heart disease, stroke, lung diseases, diabetes and more.

Though smoking is less prevalent in the United States than in Europe, and has been declining for years, it is still responsible for 480,000 deaths a year in the country, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Some 12.5 percent of all US adults are current cigarette smokers, according to the FDA.

**The Ukraine crisis sounds an alarm for the world. Facts once again have proven that sanctions are a double-edged sword.**

China President Xi Jinping said at the opening ceremony of the BRICS Business Forum via video link

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