

NEW SETTLEMENTS Blinken warns against Israeli expansion

REUTERS, Washington

Secretary of State Antony Blinken pledged continued US commitment to both Israel's security and a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict yesterday, but warned the expansion of Jewish settlements would be an obstacle to peace.

In a speech to the pro-Israel lobby group AIPAC, Blinken also cautioned that moves toward annexation of the Israeli-occupied West Bank or that disrupt the status quo at holy sites would hurt the prospects for a two-state solution. He didn't name the specific holy sites he was referring to.

"Settlement expansion clearly presents an obstacle to the horizon of hope that we seek," Blinken said to muted response from the audience. The top US diplomat drew widespread applause when he outlined the longstanding American commitment to Israel.

SCHOOL POISONING Around 60 Afghan girls hospitalised

REUTERS, Kabul

Around 60 Afghan girls were hospitalised after being poisoned at their school in northern Afghanistan, police said yesterday.

The poisoning, which targeted a girls' school in the Afghan province of Sar-e Pol, comes after intense scrutiny of girls' education in the war-torn nation since the Taliban took over and barred most teenage female students and after a wave of poison attacks on girls' schools in neighbouring Iran.

"Some unknown people entered a girls' ... school in Sancharak District ... and poisoned the classes, when the girls come to classes they got poisoned," said Den Mohammad Nazari, Sar-e-Pol's police spokesperson, without elaborating on which substance was used or who was thought to be behind the incident.

Nazari said the girls had been taken to hospital but were in "good condition." No one had been arrested.

During Afghanistan's previous foreign-backed government, several poisoning attacks on girls' schools had taken place. The Taliban administration has prevented most female students from attending high school and university.



Activists dressed up as evil oil executives pour fake oil over a cardboard iceberg during a protest organised by Extinction Rebellion to call for a permanent ban on oil exploration in Antarctica as part of World Environment Day in Cape Town, South Africa yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

'Large-scale' Ukrainian offensive thwarted

Claims Moscow; Wagner chief says Russia lost ground near Bakhmut

REUTERS, Kyiv

Moscow said yesterday it had thwarted "a large-scale" Ukrainian offensive in the south of Ukraine's Donetsk region but Russia's main mercenary leader said Russian forces had lost ground around Bakhmut further north.

Asked whether the attacks represented the start of Ukraine's long-heralded counter-offensive against Russia's invasion, Oleksiy Danilov, Secretary of Ukraine's Security and Defence Council, told Reuters: "The war continues. Until complete victory."

Russia's defence ministry said Ukraine had attacked on Sunday morning with six mechanised and two tank battalions in southern Donetsk, where Moscow has long suspected Ukraine would seek to drive a wedge through Russian-controlled territory.

"On the morning of June 4, the enemy launched a large-scale offensive in five sectors of the front in the South Donetsk direction," the defence ministry said in a statement posted on Telegram at 1:30 am Moscow time (2230 GMT).

"The enemy's goal was to break through our defences in the most vulnerable, in its opinion, sector of the front," it said. "The enemy did not achieve its tasks, it had no success."

Asked to comment, a Ukrainian military spokesperson said: "We do not have such information and we do not comment on any kind of fake."

The commander of Ukraine's ground forces, Oleksandr Syrskyi, said yesterday that Ukrainian forces continued "moving forward" near the long-contested city of Bakhmut in northern Donetsk and an armed forces video showed Russian positions under fire.

Russian mercenary leader Yevgeny Prigozhin said Ukrainian forces had retaken part of the settlement of Berkhivka, north of Bakhmut in eastern Ukraine,

calling it a "disgrace".

Prigozhin's private Wagner army captured Bakhmut last month after the longest battle of the war and handed its positions there to regular Russian troops.

The daily report from Ukraine's General Staff said only that there were 29 combat clashes in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of eastern Ukraine.

Ukraine's Centre for Strategic Communications did not address Russian statement directly but said, without providing evidence, that Russia would seek to spread lies.

"To demoralize Ukrainians and mislead the community (including their own population), Russian propagandists will spread false information about the counter-offensive, its directions, and the losses of Ukrainian army," it said.

Ukrainian Defence Minister Oleksii Reznikov published a cryptic message on Twitter on Sunday, quoting Depeche Mode's track "Enjoy the Silence".

Russian war bloggers reported fighting at several points across the front, particularly around Vuhledar, some 150 km (93 miles) southwest of Bakhmut.

Russia's defence ministry released video of what it said showed several Ukrainian armoured vehicles in a field blowing up after being hit. Reuters geo-located it to near Velyka Novosilka, a village west of Vuhledar but could not verify the date.

"There is a tough fight going on," wrote prominent Russian military blogger Semyon Pegov, who blogs under the name War Gonzo, saying Ukrainian forces were attacking in the area.

The ministry said Russian forces killed 250 Ukrainian troops as well as destroying 16 tanks, three infantry fighting vehicles and 21 armoured combat vehicles. Reuters was not able to verify the figures. Both sides have exaggerated casualties suffered by the other.



Iran embassy to reopen in KSA today

AFP, Riyadh

Iran is set to reopen its embassy in Saudi Arabia today following a seven-year closure, a diplomatic source told AFP, sealing a Chinese-brokered rapprochement deal announced in March.

Saudi Arabia severed relations with Iran in 2016, after its embassy in Tehran and consulate in the northwestern city of Mashhad were attacked during protests over Riyadh's execution of Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr.

Iran's diplomatic mission, which was expelled by Saudi authorities, will return under the leadership of Alireza Enayati, who previously served as Iran's ambassador to Kuwait.

"The opening of the Iranian embassy will take place today at 6:00 pm local time (1500 GMT) with the presence of the newly appointed Iranian ambassador" to Saudi Arabia, a diplomatic source in Riyadh told AFP yesterday.

Saudi Arabia has yet to confirm when it will reopen its embassy in Tehran or its pick for ambassador.

Iranian media had named Enayati as the Islamic republic's Saudi envoy last month. He had previously served as assistant to the foreign minister and director general of Gulf affairs at the foreign ministry.

After years of discord, the two Middle East heavyweights signed a surprise reconciliation agreement in China on March 10.

2024 WHITE HOUSE BID

Ex-VP Pence enters race

AFP, Washington

Republican former vice president Mike Pence yesterday launched his hotly-anticipated challenge to one-time boss Donald Trump for the party's 2024 White House nomination, setting up the unusual scenario of two running mates becoming rivals.

The 63-year-old Pence filed his nomination papers with the Federal Election Commission ahead of an official declaration to be made by video tomorrow in the early voting state of Iowa -- joining an already crowded primary field.



He spent his 2017-21 tenure as vice president honing his reputation as a loyal deputy who brought the religious right into the tent and who was willing to defend the president against any accusation.

But he became a pariah in Trumpworld after rejecting Trump's demands that he overturn the 2020 election in his role as president of the Senate.

Pence has spent much of the last two years touring early-nominating states such as Iowa, S Carolina and New Hampshire to reinforce his political vision as a "Christian, conservative, Republican -- in that order."

His entry doesn't much change the dynamics of the race, which is divided into three lanes -- runaway leader Donald Trump, Trump's closest rival Ron DeSantis, and everyone else.

EU DISINFORMATION CODE Twitter 'chose confrontation'

AFP, Brussels

Twitter "chose confrontation" by exiting a voluntary EU disinformation code of practice that lays ground rules for an incoming European law on digital services, a European Union commissioner said yesterday. "We believe this is a mistake of Twitter. Twitter has chosen the hard way. They chose confrontation," commissioner Vera Jourova said. She said Twitter's compliance with the new Digital Services Act entering force on August 25 "will be scrutinised... vigorously and urgently". The European Commission announced May 27 Twitter had decided to leave the code of practice, to which other major online platforms such as Google, Microsoft and TikTok continue to adhere.

LEADERSHIP ROLE

Ardern receives NZ top honour

REUTERS, Sydney

Former prime minister Jacinda Ardern yesterday received one of New Zealand's top honours, recognising her efforts for leading the country

through the Covid-19 crisis, the terror attacks on two Christchurch mosques and

the White Island volcanic eruption. Ardern was named "Dame Grand Companion," the second highest honour in New Zealand, on King Charles' birthday holiday celebrated by the country on June 5,

and she made the coronation honours list for this year. The awardee is usually chosen in New Zealand by the prime minister and then approved by the British monarch, the head of state.



No visible step to enforce HC order

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pollute the soil, hamper the growth of plants and resist water recharging of the ground water, he added.

According to a World Bank study, Bangladesh's annual per capita plastic consumption in urban areas tripled to 9.0 kg in 2020 from 3.0 kg in 2005.

Consumption of packaging materials (plastic bags, etc.) increased fivefold from 2005 to 2020. Only 31 percent of 977,000 tonnes of plastic, consumed in 2020, were recycled. Single-use plastic items like shopping bags and wrappers are more mismanaged than other plastic items, says the WB study published in 2021.

Single-use plastic items pile up on coastlines and cram canals in Chattogram, Patuakhali, Khulna and Cox's Bazar.

The Chaktai canal in Chattogram has been choked by many types of single-use plastic packets, water and soft drink bottles, and empty packets of biscuits and chips. The canal is connected to the Karnaphuli, the port city's lifeline, reports our Chattogram correspondent.

Situation of other canals in the port city is not much different. Moderate or heavy rainfall, as a result, causes the streets in the port city to be flooded.

Chittagong University of Engineering and Technology

Prof Swapan Kumar Palit of civil engineering department said that the main cause of waterlogging in the port city is the use of canals as dumping zones.

Mia Mahmudul Hoque, deputy director of the DoE Chattogram City unit, told The Daily Star that actions can be taken against polythene manufacturers as the Environment Protection Act has specific instructions to stop the production and use of polythene.

"But we are not able to implement the High Court order as there are no specific instructions in the law about how to take action against single-use plastic," he pointed out.

Five aspirants are vying for the upcoming mayoral election in Cox's Bazar, a municipality particularly vulnerable to environmental pollution.

All of them are using plastic-coated election posters. Thousands of laminated posters for both mayoral and councillor posts are hanging from ropes stretched overhead between poles or buildings, reports our Cox's Bazar correspondent.

The HC directive is completely ignored in Cox's Bazar and single-use plastic products are used here in larger quantities than in any other district across the country, said Ibrahim Khalil Mamun, chief executive of Youth Environment Society (YES), an organisation

that works against environmental degradation in Cox's Bazar.

Around 130 tonnes of waste are produced in Cox's Bazar during the peak season every day while it is around 80 tonnes during off-season, said Kabir Hossain, conservancy officer of Cox's Bazar municipality.

In Kuakata, a beach town in Patuakhali, about 23 kgs of non-biodegradable waste accumulate on the beach daily, reveals Blue-Guard, a voluntary youth organisation that works within the fishing community.

In 2022, the organisation removed 1093 kgs of plastic waste from the beach for four hours every month for a total of 48 hours a year. These wastes included plastic bottles, polythene bags, chips, Chanachur-biscuit wrappers, tin shells, abandoned fishermen's nets, Manik, a member of the blueguard, said.

Contacted, Kazi Saifuddin, assistant director of Patuakhali Department of Environment, said, "We are discouraging the use of plastic and polythene. Locally we are not giving license for the production of polythene or plastic products."

Also, under the existing law, punitive measures are being taken by conducting mobile courts against polythene in local hotels and restaurants. However, adequate operations cannot be carried out due to manpower shortage, he added.

In Khulna, 25 to 30 tonnes of

plastic waste are generated every day. Only 10 to 15 percent of this amount is single-use plastic and around 60 percent of it remains uncollected in the city, said Abdul Aziz, chief conservancy officer of Khulna City Corporation.

"All of this uncollected waste ends up in the drainage channels and water bodies, and ultimately, into the sea," he said.

"Single-use plastic products are our main concern nowadays. It is not possible to recycle them. It is also hard to collect them as they are dumped around the tea stall and grocery shops," he said adding there are around three thousand tea stalls only in Khulna city.

Professor Monirul Islam, who teaches at the Department of Fisheries, Dhaka university, said, "If ban on single-use plastic items is not implemented, they will go into the Bay of Bengal flowing through the rivers, and even into the deep sea, which will seriously hamper marine life."

Many fishermen use plastic nets and dump them into the river, which is also a very worrisome matter for the fisheries sector, he stressed.

Dr Abdul Hamid, director general of the DoE, could not be reached for comments after repeated attempts.

(Our Correspondents from Cox's Bazar, Chattogram, Patuakhali and Khulna contributed to this story)

BNP, Jamaat reconcile

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"If the parties are on the street with their own programmes, will a formal announcement make any difference? Everyone will carry out the programmes from their positions ... this is a simultaneous movement," said one of the leaders wishing not to be named.

A senior BNP leader said, "The entire issue is political and strategic."

Sources said Jamaat decided to come up with more programmes after the US introduced a new visa policy on May 24 under which the US would deny visas to people believed

7,001 cases filed under DSA till Jan 31

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the Department of Public Security division of the home ministry as per the rules of the Secretariat.

In response to another query from Awami League MP Abul Kalam Azad, the law minister said that 36.70 lakh cases are pending in the trial courts till March 31 of this year.

Among them, there are 15.84 lakh civil cases and 20.86 lakh criminal cases.

Dhaka has the highest number with 5.44 lakh ongoing cases, and Chattogram follows next with 2.71

to be responsible for or complicit in undermining the democratic election process in Bangladesh.

Jamaat had announced a programme in Baitul Mukarram area but was denied police permission. It announced a rally at the same venue on June 10. The party hopes to get the police permission this time as it is the weekend.

Two senior leaders of Jamaat said due to the US visa policy, it would be tough for the government to obstruct their programmes. And they believe it is the right time to take to the street with fresh anti-government programmes.

lakh cases.

In response to a query from AL MP Morshed Alam from Noakhali 2, the law minister said that the present government is working tirelessly to establish a modern judiciary to alleviate the suffering of the people seeking justice.

"If the steps taken by the government are implemented, the number of pending cases across the country will come down to a tolerable level and there will be effective and visible improvement in the speedy disposal of cases," he added.