

TAIWAN
ELECTIONUS warns
China against
interference

AFP, Washington

The United States on Friday warned China not to interfere in Taiwan's upcoming presidential elections, urging "responsible behaviour on all sides."

The lead-up to the self-ruled island's January 13 poll is being closely watched – including by policymakers in Beijing and Washington – as it could determine the future of Taiwan's relations with an increasingly bellicose China.

"Our strong expectation and hope is that those elections be free of intimidation, or coercion, or interference from all sides," said the US ambassador to China, Nicholas Burns.

"The United States is not involved and will not be involved in these elections," Burns said.



Smoke billows from Israeli bombardment over Khan Yunis from Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

US RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ACT

Designate India
as 'country of
particular concern'
Watchdog implores Biden

REUTERS, Washington

The US religious freedom watchdog on Friday again called on the Biden administration to designate India as a "country of particular concern" under the US Religious Freedom Act, citing its alleged targeting of religious minorities overseas.

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent federal government commission, said "recent efforts by the Indian government to silence activists, journalists, and lawyers abroad pose a serious threat to religious freedom."

"USCIRF implores the US Department of State to designate India a Country of Particular Concern due to India's systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief," it said in a statement.

USCIRF Commissioner Stephen Schneck called the Indian government's alleged involvement in the killing of Sikh activist Hardeep Singh Nijjar in Canada and a plot to kill another Sikh activist, Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, in the United States "deeply troubling."

Federal prosecutors in Manhattan said this month that an Indian national had worked with an unnamed Indian government employee on the plot to assassinate a New York City resident who advocated for a sovereign Sikh state in northern India. India's government has denied involvement in the plot.

The issue is highly delicate for both India and the Biden administration as they try to build closer ties in the face of an ascendant China perceived as a threat for both democracies.

USCIRF said it had recommended each year since 2020 that the State Department label India a country of particular concern, a designation under the 1998 US Religious Freedom Act. The act allows a range of policy responses, including sanctions or waivers, but they are not automatic.

USCIRF Commissioner David Curry said India's extension of domestic repression to target religious minorities from India living abroad "is especially dangerous and cannot be ignored."

EYE ON CHINA

Japan, Asean begin
special summit

THE JAPAN NEWS

Japan and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) yesterday began a special summit in Tokyo to commemorate 50 years of friendship and cooperation.

The two parties are expected to issue today a joint statement setting out a vision for future cooperation that will include interpersonal exchanges and economic collaboration, among other goals.

The Japanese government aims to further bolster its relationship with Asean countries against a background in which China is increasing its maritime expansion.

Indonesian President Joko Widodo – the current Asean chair – and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida are cochairing the gathering.

A joint statement and an implementation plan outlining specific areas of cooperation are expected to be issued with a focus on human and cultural exchanges, economic partnerships and enhanced security cooperation between Japan and Asean.

The implementation plan is likely to urge stronger ties vis-a-vis the production of next-generation transportation, including electric vehicles. The implementation plan also is expected to affirm that Japan and Asean will reinforce cooperation aimed at maintaining maritime order based on the rule of law.

Yesterday, the Japanese leader met with Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and agreed that Japan will provide Malaysia with rescue boats and other equipment for surveillance and other purposes under the official security assistance (OSA) framework. Kishida also met yesterday with Brunei's Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah and Laotian Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone.

RUNNING GAZA AFTER HAMAS

US wants shakeup of
Palestinian authority

REUTERS

A succession of top US officials have travelled to the West Bank in recent weeks to meet with Mahmoud Abbas in the hope the 88-year-old – a spectator in the war between Israel and Hamas – can overhaul his unpopular Palestinian Authority enough to run Gaza after the conflict.

An architect of the 1993 Oslo peace accords with Israel that raised hopes of Palestinian statehood, Abbas has seen his legitimacy steadily undermined by Israeli settlement building in the occupied West Bank, which he oversees. Many Palestinians now regard his administration as corrupt, undemocratic and out of touch.

But in the wake of Hamas' October 7 attacks on Israel, President Joe Biden has made it clear that he wants to see a revitalised Palestinian Authority – which Abbas has run since 2005 – take charge in Gaza once the conflict is over, unifying its administration with the West Bank.

Jake Sullivan, Biden's national security advisor, met with Abbas on Friday, becoming the latest senior US official to urge him to implement rapid change. Secretary of State Antony Blinken told reporters after meeting the Palestinian leader in late November that they discussed the need for reforms to combat corruption, empower civil society and support a free press.

Three Palestinian and one senior regional official briefed

on the conversations said that Washington's proposals behind closed doors would also involve Abbas ceding some of his control over the Authority.

Under the proposals that have been floated, Abbas could appoint a deputy, hand broader executive powers to his prime minister, and introduce new figures into the leadership of the organization, the Palestinian and regional sources said.

The White House did not provide answers to Reuters questions. The State Department said leadership choices were a question for the Palestinian people and did not elaborate on the steps needed to revitalize the Authority.

In an interview with Reuters at his office in Ramallah, Abbas said he was ready to revamp the Palestinian Authority with new leaders and to hold elections – which have been suspended since Hamas won the last vote in 2006 and pushed the PA out of Gaza – provided there was a binding international agreement that would lead to the creation of a Palestinian state.

That has been something Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his far right coalition have refused to countenance.

"The problem is not changing (Palestinian) politicians and forming a new government, the problem is the policies of the Israeli government," Abbas said in the interview last week, when asked about the US proposals.

While Abbas may accept that his long rule is nearing its end, he and other Palestinian leaders say the US, Israel's key strategic ally, must press Netanyahu's government to allow the establishment of a Palestinian state encompassing Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

According to a person in Washington familiar with the matter, Abbas has privately expressed openness to some US proposals for reform of the PA, including bringing in "new blood" with technocratic skills and giving the prime minister's office new executive powers.

While US officials insist they had not proposed any names to Abbas, regional sources and diplomats say some in Washington and Israel favour Hussein al-Sheikh – a senior PLO official – as a possible deputy and future successor.

Washington has appealed to Jordan, Egypt and Gulf states – which have some sway with the PA – to persuade Abbas to pursue institutional reforms with urgency to prepare for the "day after", four US sources said, including two administration officials. Officials in Jordan, Egypt, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Abbas has pledged several times to overhaul his administration in recent years and has little to show for it, so senior US officials will continue to push as they wait to see if he will follow through this time, the US sources said.

OFFENSIVE AGAINST JUNTA

Myanmar fighters
seize trading hub

AFP, Bangkok

Ethnic minority fighters battling Myanmar's junta said yesterday they seized a trading hub in Shan state, days after China said it had mediated a temporary ceasefire. Clashes have raged across Myanmar's northern Shan state since the Arakan Army (AA), the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) launched a joint offensive late October. The three allied groups – known as the Three Brotherhood Alliance – say they have captured military positions and border hubs vital for trade with China, posing what analysts say is the biggest military challenge to the junta since it seized power in 2021. On Thursday, Beijing announced a temporary ceasefire between the alliance and the Myanmar military. There have been peaceful spells in MNDAA-held areas, but clashes have continued in areas controlled by the TNLA and the AA. The TNLA said they captured Namhsan on Friday after launching an attack in the area more than two weeks ago. "We got the town," Brigadier-General Tar Bhone Kyaw told AFP. The TNLA posted video footage on Facebook showing leaders of the group visiting the town and talking to junta soldiers taken prisoner. Brigadier-General Zaw Min Tun, a spokesperson for Myanmar's army, also told state-run TV channel MRTV on Friday that fighting was continuing around Namhsan. According to TNLA's Tar Bhone Kyaw, the Myanmar army also lost the 105-Mile Trade Zone on the border with China in Muse township, Shan state.

FAILURE TO CURB
POLLUTIONCalifornia
children sue
US govt

AFP, Los Angeles

Children in California are suing the US government over its failure to curb pollution, the latest in a series of legal actions by young people around the world worried about climate change. The youngsters, aged between eight and 17, say the Environmental Protection Agency – the federal regulator – "intentionally allows life-threatening climate pollution to be emitted by the fossil fuel sources of greenhouse gases it regulates, harming children's health and welfare,"

according to Our Children's Trust, a non-profit law firm. "Plaintiffs also claim the EPA has discriminated against them as children by discounting the economic value of their lives and their future when it decides whether and how much climate pollution to allow." The suit, lodged on December 10, asks the federal court to declare the EPA

has violated their constitutional rights to equal protection under the law and their fundamental right to life. One of the litigants, identified only as Genesis because of her age, says she lives in a home without air conditioning that is becoming intolerable as temperatures rise. "Genesis must keep the windows in her house open in the summer, exposing her to ash from wildfire smoke and more pollen, which worsens her allergies and results in frequent runny noses, coughing, and congestion," Our Children's Trust said on its website. Our Children's Trust has ongoing cases in Hawaii, Utah, Virginia, and Oregon.



Pelicans are pictured at the polluted river Cooum, in Chennai yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

PAKISTAN SMOG

Artificial rain
used for first
time

AFP, Lahore

Artificial rain was used for the first time in Pakistan yesterday in a bid to combat hazardous levels of smog in the megacity of Lahore, the provincial government said.

In the first experiment of its kind in the South Asian country, planes equipped with cloud seeding equipment flew over 10 areas of the city, often ranked one of the worst places globally for air pollution.

The "gift" was provided by the United Arab Emirates, said caretaker chief minister of Punjab, Mohsin Naqvi.

"Teams from the UAE, along with two planes, arrived here about 10 to 12 days ago. They used 48 flares to create the rain," he told media.

He said the team would know by the night what effect the "artificial rain" had.