

## International

# Turbulent Trump diplomacy ends with scrapped Europe, Taiwan trips

## U-turn encapsulates turbulent transition period in Washington

WASHINGTON: The United States called off last-minute trips by top envoys to its allies in Europe and Taiwan on Tuesday in a sudden diplomatic volte-face during the chaotic swansong days of the Trump administration. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had been due to make a final official visit to Europe while Kelly Clark, Washington's UN envoy, was set to land in Taiwan yesterday afternoon.

But the visits were suddenly scrapped a week before Democrat Joe Biden takes office and as President Donald Trump faces an all-but-certain second impeachment on a charge of inciting his supporters to storm Congress last week. The U-turn encapsulates the turbulent transition period that has enveloped Washington since Biden's November election victory.

But it also allows both Europe and Taiwan to dodge hosting what could have been potentially awkward delegations by an outgoing administration. "It was very late in the game to be having a visit of this level," Maggie Lewis, an analyst at Seton Hall Law school who is based in Taiwan, told AFP. "It's appropriate to be focusing on the incoming administration instead of the final days of the Trump administration."

### 'Political pyromaniac'

The canceled trips round off four tumultuous years of foreign policy under Trump that tested Washington's traditional allies in both Europe and Asia. The two-day stay in Europe would have been Pompeo's last foreign trip but the State Department announced he was staying to ensure a "smooth and orderly" transition.

The trip was already looking of limited diplomat-

ic value with Pompeo not scheduled to meet any top EU officials in Brussels.

In Luxembourg, an official told AFP on condition of anonymity that one leg of Pompeo's trip was canceled after Foreign Minister Jean Asselborn called Trump a "criminal" in comments to RTL radio. Asselborn described Trump as a "political pyromaniac who must be brought before a court" over last week's attack on the US Capitol by his supporters.

Pompeo has remained staunchly loyal to Trump despite resignations from a string of his cabinet colleagues and calls to force the president from office over the attack on the Capitol. Craft's planned visit to Taiwan came at an acutely perilous time for the self-ruled democracy. Authoritarian China regards Taiwan as its own territory and has vowed to seize it one day, if necessary by force.

Beijing's saber-rattling has reached new heights with Chinese jets making a record 380 incursions into Taiwan's defense zone last year to signal anger over Washington's burgeoning relationship with Taipei during the Trump years.

### China warnings

The stakes are high. A wrong move in the Taiwan Strait could spark conflict between two economic, nuclear-armed superpowers, something the Biden administration will need to grapple with. The US switched diplomatic recognition to Beijing in 1979 but it remains Taipei's leading unofficial ally and is bound by Congress to sell the island weapons to defend itself.

As Trump feuded with China on a host of issues, from the coronavirus to trade and national security, Taipei became a way to poke Beijing in the eye.



TAIPEI: Taiwan's Presidential Office building is seen in Taipei yesterday, as a planned trip to Taiwan by the United States' UN ambassador Kelly Craft was scrapped in line with the US State Department cancelling trips abroad ahead of Joe Biden's inauguration. —AFP

During his tenure, Trump signed off on some \$18 billion in big-ticket arms deals for Taiwan and ramped up the frequency of official visits, including sending a cabinet official last year, the highest-level delegation since 1979.

Then on Sunday, Secretary of State Mike

Pompeo declared he was lifting "complex internal restrictions" limiting official contacts with Taiwan. Beijing promptly warned Washington would "receive a resolute counterstrike from China" over the move and "pay a heavy price" if Craft visited. —AFP

## Pakistan virginity tests block justice for victims

LAHORE: Raped at 14, Shazia took the rare and courageous step of reporting the crime to Pakistani police, only to face a traumatic "virginity test"—a long-standing practice that denies justice to victims. The teenager was still in a daze after she was assaulted by her father's cousin when police forced her to see a doctor, who conducted the invasive medical exam intended to determine whether she had a history of having sex.

Shazia, not her real name, told AFP in a written statement about the invasive test. "It was very painful. I didn't know why she was doing it. I wish my mother had been with me." In a country where rape is vastly underreported and survivors of sexual assault are viewed with suspicion, virginity tests are often ordered as part of police investigations.

The result can be critical to any criminal case, with an unmarried victim discredited if she is deemed to be

sexually active. That goes some way towards explaining Pakistan's abysmal rape conviction rate, activists and lawyers say, with official data putting it as low as 0.3 percent. A woman is supposed to conduct the examinations, but this guideline is not always followed. Other visual virginity tests—sometimes using glass rods—look for signs of healed tears or scarring. They can have a harrowing effect on survivors of sexual assault, who already face terrible social stigma in a country obsessed with upholding the "honor" of women.

"I wasn't told how they were going to examine me. They only said that I had to be seen by a doctor to help the police," Shazia said of her ordeal from three years ago. Shazia's parents, who filed the case, later dropped it following family pressure.

Similar virginity tests are employed in at least 20 countries around the world from Brazil to Zimbabwe,



In this file photo taken, a supporter of Pakistani Islamic political party Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) holds a placard reading "Stop" during a protest against an alleged gang rape of a woman, in Lahore. —AFP

according to the World Health Organization. It says the exams amount to human rights violations and have absolutely no scientific merit. But Pakistani health authorities have long encouraged all girls and women who report rape claims to be subjected to the tests. "I count this as another rape in itself," Sidra Humayun, an activist

who handles sexual assault cases, said. "Most rape victims I have worked with have spoken of being traumatized by it." Court documents seen by AFP paint a vivid picture of how female rape victims can be shamed and ridiculed if a medical officer concludes that they have a history of sexual intercourse. —AFP

## Kim pledges to strengthen nuclear arsenal

SEOUL: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un pledged to strengthen his country's nuclear arsenal as he delivered his closing address to a top ruling party meeting, state television showed yesterday, days before Joe Biden takes office as US president.

Kim is looking to grab the attention of the incoming Biden administration, analysts say, with his country more isolated than ever after closing its borders to protect itself against the coronavirus pandemic.

A nuclear summit between Kim and outgoing US President Donald Trump in Hanoi in February 2019 broke down over sanctions relief and what Pyongyang would be willing to give up in return. "We must further strengthen the nuclear war deterrent while doing our best to build up the most powerful military strength," Kim told the Workers' Party

congress, footage broadcast on Korea Central Television showed.

Thousands of delegates and attendees—none of them wearing masks—repeatedly rose to their feet in the cavernous April 25 House of Culture venue to interrupt his speech with applause. Earlier in the eight-day meeting, which has lasted twice as long as the previous gathering in 2016, Kim called the US "the fundamental obstacle to the development of our revolution and our foremost principal enemy". Its policy towards the North "will never change, whoever comes into power", he added, without mentioning Biden by name.

The North had completed plans for a nuclear-powered submarine, he said—a strategic game-changer—and offered a shopping list including hypersonic gliding warheads, military reconnaissance satellites and solid-fuel intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs).

Pyongyang's weapons programs have made rapid progress under Kim, and at a parade in October it showed off a huge new ICBM that analysts said was the largest road-mobile, liquid-fuelled missile in the world. The change of leadership in Washington



PYONGYANG: This picture taken on Tuesday and released from North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) yesterday shows North Korean leader Kim Jong Un delivering a speech to conclude the 8th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) in Pyongyang. —AFP

presents a challenge for North Korea: Biden is associated with the Obama administration's "strategic patience" approach and characterized Kim as a "thug" during the presidential debates. —AFP

## Hunt for cockpit tapes after Indonesia jet crash

JAKARTA: Bad weather forced scores of divers to temporarily suspend their hunt for a crashed Indonesian jet's cockpit voice recorder yesterday, as investigators worked to read critical details on a flight data device that had already been salvaged.

The two "black boxes" could supply key clues as to why the Sriwijaya Air Boeing 737-500 plunged about 10,000 feet (3,000 meters) in less than a minute before slamming into the Java Sea soon after take-off on Saturday, taking with it 62 people. Divers just off the coast of Jakarta had hauled the data recorder to the surface Tuesday, with the hunt now focused on finding a voice recorder on the wreckage-littered seabed.

The discovery came as a team from the US National Transportation Safety

Board (NTSB) prepared to join the investigation in the capital, along with staff from Boeing, the Federal Aviation Administration and jet engine producer GE Aviation. While dozens of boats and helicopters searched for wreckage, poor conditions forced divers to temporarily suspend their hunt.

"It was called off...due to bad weather. All divers are now on standby," said search and rescue agency spokesman Yusuf Latif.

A remotely operated underwater vehicle was still searching the wreckage-littered seabed. Agency chief Soerjanto Tjahjono said a day earlier that investigators hoped to download data from the retrieved black box in a matter of days, so "we can reveal the mystery behind this accident". Black box data includes the speed, altitude



JAKARTA: Forensic policemen carry a bag containing debris from Sriwijaya Air flight SJ182 at Tanjung Priok port yesterday found during search operations. —AFP

and direction of the plane as well as flight crew conversations, and helps explain nearly 90 percent of all crashes, according to aviation experts.

So far authorities have been unable

to explain why the 26-year-old plane crashed just four minutes after setting off from Jakarta, bound for Pontianak city on Borneo island, a 90-minute flight away. —AFP

## Coronavirus fails to deter massive Ganges pilgrimage

HARIDWAR, India: Hindu pilgrims flocked to the Ganges river in India yesterday, shrugging off the risk of coronavirus a day before the start of the Kumbh Mela—a religious festival that attracts millions each time it is held. Despite India having the second most coronavirus infections in the world—and more than 150,000 deaths—the virus has not stopped devout Hindus from making the pilgrimage. "The pandemic is a bit of a worry, but we are taking all precautions," said organizer Siddharth Chakrapani, who expected between 800,000 to a million people to attend today alone.

"I'm sure Maa Ganga will take care of their safety," he added, referring to the river considered holy by the faithful. According to Hindu mythology, gods and demons fought a war over a sacred pitcher containing the nectar of immortality. Drops fell at four different locations, which now alternate as hosts for the immense gatherings.

Recognised as a cultural heritage by UNESCO in 2017, the last Kumbh Mela in Allahabad in 2019 attracted around 55 million people over 48 days. This year, beginning today, Haridwar in northern India is the host, and several million people were expected to throng the holy city in Uttarakhand state over the coming seven weeks. —AFP

## Chinese province of 37m declares 'emergency'

BEIJING: A Chinese province of more than 37 million declared an "emergency state" yesterday to snuff out a handful of Covid-19 cases, as the country moved decisively to contain infections. China had largely brought the coronavirus under control since its emergence in Wuhan late in 2019. But recent weeks have seen smatterings of cases, prompting localized lockdowns, immediate travel restrictions and widespread testing of tens of millions of people. More than 20 million are now under some form of lockdown in the country's northern regions.

Yesterday, the government of northeastern Heilongjiang—with a population of 37.5 million people—declared an "emergency state", telling residents not to leave the province unless absolutely necessary, and to cancel conferences and gatherings. That was in response to finding 28 Covid-19 cases on Wednesday, including 12 that were asymptomatic. Three infections were found in the provincial capital Harbin, which is hosting a famous ice sculpture festival that is usually a big draw for tourists.

The festival, featuring glittering ice palaces and fantastical scenes, has drawn millions over the years to one of China's coldest cities, where temperatures are set to dip to minus 30 degrees Celsius over the next few days (minus 22 degrees Fahrenheit).

Suihua city, a short car journey north and home to more than 5.2 million people, was sealed off on Monday after reporting one confirmed case and 45 asymptomatic cases. Several other small cities near Suihua were also sealed off or placed under travel restrictions, authorities said yesterday. —AFP