

International

Biden administration to review US-Taliban withdrawal deal

Violence rages across Afghanistan despite ceasefire agreement

WASHINGTON: The Biden administration said it will review a landmark US deal with the Taliban, focusing on whether the insurgent group has reduced attacks in Afghanistan, in keeping with its side of the agreement. Washington struck a deal with the Taliban in Qatar last year, to begin withdrawing its troops in return for security guarantees from the militants and a commitment to kickstart peace talks with the Afghan government.

But violence across Afghanistan has surged despite the two sides engaging in those talks since September. President Joe Biden's newly appointed national security advisor, Jake Sullivan, spoke with his Afghan counterpart Hamdullah Mohib and "made clear the National Security Council's intention to review" the deal, said National Security Council spokeswoman Emily Horne late Friday.

Specifically, Washington wants to check that the Taliban is "living up to its commitments to cut ties with terrorist groups, to reduce violence in Afghanistan, and to engage in meaningful negotiations with the Afghan government and other stakeholders," her statement continued. It added that Sullivan "underscored that the US will support the peace process with a robust and regional diplomatic effort, which will aim to help the two sides achieve a durable and just political settlement and permanent ceasefire."

Sullivan also discussed the United States' support

for protecting recent progress made on women and minority groups' rights as part of the peace process. When contacted, the Taliban said they remained "committed to the agreement and honor our commitments".

"We expect the other side to remain committed to the agreement too," Mohammad Naeem, the group's spokesman in Qatar, told AFP. Washington's move was met with a sigh of relief from officials in Kabul after months of speculation over how the new administration would potentially recalibrate the Afghan policy. Mohib, the Afghan national security advisor, tweeted that during the call the two sides "agreed to work toward a permanent ceasefire and a just and durable peace" in the country.

Another top Afghan government official lambasted the Taliban's failure to live up to the February 2020 deal, saying the agreement had failed to achieve its stated goals. "The agreement so far, did not deliver a desired goal of ending Taliban's violence and bringing a ceasefire desired by the Afghans," Sediq Sediqqi, Deputy Interior Minister and former spokesman to President Ashraf Ghani said on Twitter.

"The Taliban did not live up to its commitments." Deadly attacks and high-profile assassinations have increased in recent months, particularly in Kabul where several journalists, activists, judges and politicians have been murdered in brazen daylight



HERAT: Afghan President Ashraf Ghani (center) arrives with the government delegation during a visit in Herat province on Friday. — AFP

attacks. The Taliban have denied responsibility for these killings, but Afghan and US officials have blamed the group for the murders. On Tuesday,

Biden's nominee for secretary of state, Antony Blinken, told his Senate confirmation hearing that "we want to end this so-called forever war." —AFP

Sri Lankan minister tests positive after endorsing sorcery

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka's health minister, who publicly endorsed sorcery and magic potions to stop surging coronavirus infections in the island, has tested positive and will self-isolate, officials said yesterday.

Pavithra Wanniarachchi had publicly consumed and endorsed a magic potion, later revealed to contain honey and nutmeg, manufactured by a sorcerer who claimed it worked as a life-long inoculation against the virus. She also poured a pot of "blessed" water into a river in November after a self-styled god-man told her that it would end the pandemic.

The island nation of 21 million on Friday approved the emergency use of the vaccine developed by AstraZeneca and Oxford University only

hours after Wanniarachchi tested positive, officials said. "Her antigen test returned positive on Friday and she has been asked to isolate herself," a health ministry official said.

"All her immediate contacts have been quarantined." A junior minister who had also taken the potion made popular by Wanniarachchi tested positive for the virus earlier this week.

Doctors in the island nation have said there is no scientific basis for the syrup, and there is no known cure for COVID-19. But thousands defied public gathering restrictions to swamp a village in central Sri Lanka last month to obtain the elixir, made by carpenter Dhammika Bandara.

Family members of another politician, who hailed from Bandara's village, have also been infected after taking the syrup. Pro-government media gave widespread publicity to the holy man, who claimed the formula was revealed to him by Kali, a Hindu goddess of death and destruction.

But the government has since scrambled to distance itself from Bandara, whose preparation was approved as a food supplement by the official indige-



Pavithra Wanniarachchi

nous medicine unit. Sri Lanka is in the grip of a coronavirus surge, with the number of cases and deaths soaring from 3,300 and 13 in early October to nearly 57,000 infections and 278 dead this week. —AFP

HK orders people to stay home in two-day lockdown

HONG KONG: Thousands of Hong Kongers were ordered to stay in their homes yesterday for the city's first coronavirus lockdown as authorities battle an outbreak in one of its poorest and most densely packed districts. The order bans about 10,000 people living inside multiple housing blocks within the neighborhood of Jordan from leaving their apartments until all those in the area had been tested.

Officials said they planned to screen everyone inside the designated zone within 48 hours "in order to achieve the goal of zero cases in the district". "Residents will have to stay at their premises to avoid cross-infection until they get their test results," health minister Sophia Chan told reporters yesterday. The government had deployed over 3,000 staff to enforce the lockdown, which covers about 150 housing blocks. Residents were seen lining up for testing at more than 50 mobile specimen collec-

tion vehicles parked in the area and for basic daily supplies provided by the government.

Around 3,000 people in the area had been tested. Hong Kong was one of the first places to be struck by the coronavirus after it spilled out of central China. It has recorded just over 10,000 infections with some 170 deaths by imposing effective but economically punishing social distancing measures for much of the last year.

Over the last two months the city has been hit by a fourth wave of infections, with authorities struggling to bring the daily numbers down. Stubborn clusters have emerged in low-income neighborhoods notorious for some of the world's most cramped housing. The district of Jordan recorded 162 confirmed cases from the beginning of this year to January 20.

Yesterday the city recorded 81 infections, of which 21 were from Yau Tsim Mong area where the restricted



HONG KONG: Health workers prepare to conduct testing in the Jordan area of Hong Kong yesterday, after thousands were ordered to stay in their homes for the city's first COVID-19 coronavirus lockdown as authorities battle an outbreak in one of its poorest and most densely packed districts. —AFP

district is located.

Inequality and housing shortages

On paper Hong Kong is one of the richest cities in the world. But it suffers from pervasive inequality, an acute housing shortage and eye-watering rents that successive governments have failed to solve.

The average flat in Hong Kong is

about 500 square feet (46 square meters). But many squeeze themselves into even smaller subdivided flats-cubicles that can be as tiny as 50 square feet or even less, with shared bathrooms and showers inside ageing walk-up buildings. It is in these kinds of buildings where clusters have been located in recent weeks, prompting the first lockdown order. —AFP

Patients battle COVID 'enemy' in Nigeria second wave

LAGOS: "Attention, isolation zone," warns a bright orange notice at the entrance to the main coronavirus treatment center in Lagos, Africa's most populous city. Huge black gates separate the center at the Yaba Mainland Hospital, which takes 20 seriously ill patients every day, from the hustle and bustle of the city, Nigeria's economic capital.

The gates are not just an entrance, they symbolize the gulf between the sick and those still untouched by the second wave of this devastating pandemic. On one side, hundreds of people crowd into the markets, many apparently oblivious to the virus' dangers, without masks and failing to observe social distancing. Inside, the atmosphere could not be more different. Around 100 gravely ill patients struggle to breathe, bedridden and reliant on oxygen tanks.

"I would never believe that COVID-19 (could) happen to me," says Idoja Isaac, 57, a former Nigerian Navy officer who was admitted a day earlier

with a fever and breathing difficulties. "Covid 19 is real, it's an enemy you cannot fight with (a) bullet," he adds.

Malaria or COVID?

When he first experienced symptoms a few days previously, Isaac thought he was suffering from another bout of malaria, never imagining that he too could be struck down by the virus that has afflicted millions worldwide. Nigeria, with nearly 200 million people, has registered more than 116,000 cases including 1,485 deaths. Around half of these cases have been in Lagos, which registered the first infection in sub-Saharan Africa in March.

The figures, however, are believed to be underestimates while the number of tests carried out remains far lower than in Europe. Despite the pandemic, many Nigerians continue to attribute COVID symptoms to malaria and therefore don't seek testing. The potential for COVID to be missed due to it being mistaken for malaria prompted the governor of Lagos state,



LAGOS: Health workers study with laptops results of tests to dictate levels of infections at Surveillance and Epidemiology section at the Infectious Disease Hospital (IDH) in Yaba, Lagos, yesterday. —AFP

Babajide Sanwo-Olu, to issue a warning this week. "In this second wave of coronavirus, any malaria symptom needs to be considered as Covid-19," he said on Tuesday.

Nigeria's second wave, which began in November, reached its peak of infections two weeks ago, and has since appeared to stabilize, according to health authorities. In the COVID-19 center, around half the beds are empty. And in the small intensive care unit, two out of the five available beds are filled by intubated patients, compared

with four a few weeks ago.

Likewise, the number of oxygen tanks needed to treat patients has gone from 70 a day a few weeks ago to 500 a day at the peak before coming back down to 350 a day today, said Lagos Health Commissioner Akin Abayomi. "We have never not had enough oxygen. We've been close to not having enough and we've been stretched, but we've never been in a situation when we had patients who needed oxygen, and there's no oxygen," he said. —AFP

News in brief

Trump mull replacing AG

WASHINGTON: Donald Trump considered replacing then-acting US attorney general Jeffrey A. Rosen with a Justice Department lawyer who would help him force Georgia officials to overturn the state's election result, US media reported late Friday. The New York Times said Trump only decided against the move when told that all remaining top officials at the Justice Department would resign en masse if the plan went ahead. The news, also reported in the Washington Post, comes as Trump is set to face a Senate trial for "incitement of insurrection" over his role in whipping up supporters with unfounded claims of election fraud before they stormed the US Capitol in early January. —AFP

Pakistani killed during TikTok stunt

ISLAMABAD: A young man was hit and killed by a train in Pakistan while being filmed walking along the tracks for a TikTok stunt, police and rescue officials said yesterday. The accident happened on Friday in the Shah Khalid neighborhood of Rawalpindi city, near the capital Islamabad. Hamza Naveed, 18, was walking next to the tracks while a friend filmed him, Raja Rafaqat Zaman, a spokesperson for the local rescue agency, told AFP. "The moving train hit him while he was posing for a video and walking on the railway track," Zaman said. Rescue workers rushed to the site, he said, but the young man was already dead. —AFP

US, Mexico, Guatemala bar caravans

GUATEMALA CITY: The United States, Mexico and Guatemala agreed Friday to bar migrant caravans from passing through their territories due to the Covid pandemic, days after one from Honduras was violently broken up in Guatemala. US Ambassador to Guatemala William Popp stressed that any migrants who cross the US border in an irregular manner will be returned home immediately, citing national health security. His comments came after a meeting with Guatemalan Foreign Minister Pedro Brolo and Mexican Ambassador to Guatemala Romeo Ruiz. —AFP

No severe reaction to Moderna vaccine

WASHINGTON: Severe allergic reaction to Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine is "rare," US health authorities said Friday, with only 10 cases arising from more than four million first doses. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also emphasized that widespread vaccination was critical to fighting the coronavirus pandemic. "Based on this early monitoring, anaphylaxis after receipt of Moderna Covid-19 vaccine appears to be a rare event," the CDC said in a report, indicating that none of the reactions resulted in death. The CDC data documented the 10 cases of anaphylactic shock among a reported 4,041,396 first doses administered between December 21 and January 10. —AFP

Florida condition for inoculation

MIAMI: Florida will require proof of residence for those getting a COVID shot in a push to thwart so-called "vaccine tourism," a move experts say could also leave thousands of undocumented immigrants, homeless and low-income people in the lurch. The decision came after residents of other states and even people from abroad were reportedly arriving in Florida—which currently vaccinates anyone over age 65 — with an aim of gaining easier access to immunization. —AFP