

International

Blinken presents new N Korea approach as G7 meets in person

Pyongyang denounces Biden approach as 'hostile'

LONDON: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken yesterday opened the Group of Seven's first in-person talks in two years by presenting the new administration's fresh approach on North Korea, which has already denounced it.

With COVID raging in India but increasingly coming under control in the West, Britain welcomed foreign ministers of the club of wealthy democracies to London discuss a post-pandemic agenda and prepare for a G7 summit in southwest England next month.

India, South Korea, South Africa and ASEAN bloc chair Brunei were invited as guests to the three days of talks, which will also address rising tensions with Russia and China as well as diplomacy to revive a nuclear accord with Iran.

Amid stringent anti-COVID measures including restrictions on movements, Blinken met separately at his hotel with the foreign ministers of Japan and South Korea days after President Joe Biden completed a review on North Korea policy. "We are grateful to have this opportunity to have in-depth discussions with the US after the conclusion of your policy review," South Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong said, as he welcomed the "very positive and open message" by Biden in his address to Congress last week.

The State Department said that Blinken and Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi "shared their concerns about North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile programs" in their meeting.

They agreed to work together along with Japan's



LONDON: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (left) speaks with South Korea's Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong (right) during a bilateral meeting yesterday during the G7 foreign ministers meeting. — AFP

sometime rival South Korea "towards denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula," a statement said.

Middle path on North Korea

Biden ordered an assessment of North Korea policy after his predecessor Donald Trump's unusual, highly personalized diplomacy that featured three made-for-television meetings with the totalitarian state's young leader Kim Jong Un. The review proposed a middle

ground by moving away from Trump's ambitious but ultimately unsuccessful bid to reach a far-reaching agreement that, after seven decades, could finally bring an official end to the Korean War.

But the White House also said it would engage with North Korea, a shift from former president Barack Obama's policy of "strategic patience"—or, keeping Pyongyang at arm's length until its behavior changes. "Our policy will not focus on achieving a grand bargain,

nor will it rely on strategic patience," White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said Friday, while acknowledging that successive administrations have failed to achieve the goal of ending North Korea's nuclear program. North Korea on Sunday denounced the Biden approach, saying he was keeping a "hostile policy" in place for more than half a century.

"The US-claimed 'diplomacy' is a spurious signboard for covering up its hostile acts, and 'deterrence' touted by it is just a means for posing nuclear threats to the DPRK," foreign ministry official Kwon Jong Gun said through state media, using the official name of North Korea. US officials largely expected a strident reaction from North Korea, which is known for its colorful statements, including in 2019 describing Biden as a "rabid dog" who "must be beaten to death with a stick". A welcoming dinner for the Group of Seven foreign ministers will address both North Korea and Iran.

Both the United States and Britain have played down reports that Iran will release their respective nationals from captivity as diplomacy steps up. Britain said that talks were still continuing and denounced the "torture" of dual national Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe after Iranian state television said that she could be released from years of detention after London settles an old debt.

After the G7, Blinken will head to Ukraine tomorrow in a show of support after Russia last month deployed but then pulled back some 100,000 troops along its border and in annexed Crimea. — AFP

'Europe or death': West Africans risk all to leave Tunisia

SFAX, Tunisia: Aminata Traoure survived a shipwreck in which she lost her baby daughter, her sister and her niece but she is determined to embark again on the illegal crossing to Europe. For the 28-year-old from Ivory Coast, the perilous Mediterranean crossing from the North African nation of Tunisia is her only way to build a better future. "Leaving Tunisia could ease my pain," said Traoure. Her attempt ended in tragedy on March 9, when the rickety boat she had boarded capsized along with another in the Mediterranean, and she was flung into the waters with around 200 others.

Among the 39 who drowned was Sangare Fatim, her 15-month daughter. Traoure said she would like to return home to Ivory Coast, 3,000 kilometers (2,000 miles) southwest across the sands of Sahara, but she can't afford it. The price of the ticket-plus a fine for staying three years illegally in Tunisia—costs more than a crossing to Europe. "I'll have to try again," she said.

The number risking the dangerous sea crossing from Tunisia is rising and for the first time the majority on the boats are not Tunisians. During the first quarter of 2021, more than half of those arriving in Italy from Tunisia were mostly citizens from sub-Saharan African countries, according to the Tunisian rights organization FTDES. So far this year at least 453 migrants have died trying to reach Europe from North Africa, the International Organization for Migration says. Around 100 of those had set off from Tunisia's port of Sfax.

'Hopes of their families'

"Despite the shipwrecks, despite our mourning families, we are always ready to risk our lives," said Prista Kone, 28, also from Ivory Coast. She attempted the crossing last year, but her boat was intercepted by Tunisian authorities. Kone arrived in Tunisia in 2014 with a degree in business management and plans to

pursue her studies. But without money, she found work as a housekeeper, she said. She also discovered "the extent of racism" in Tunisia.

"My boss asked me not to touch her children because I am black!" Kone said. "When something was missing in the house, she accused me of stealing it". On the streets "people called me 'monkey' and threw stones at me", she added. It is a common story among her compatriots, packed into a small room in a working-class district in Sfax. "If these people survived a shipwreck at noon, they would be ready to participate in another crossing at 1:00 pm," said Omar Coulibaly, head of the association of Ivorians in Sfax.

"For them it is Europe or death!" Coulibaly believes there are some 20,000 people from sub-Saharan nations in Tunisia, nearly two-thirds from Ivory Coast. "They represent the hopes of their families," Coulibaly said. "Some came to continue their studies, to work, others were promised huge salaries, but... they were lied to". Without employment permits, many work illegally and are grossly underpaid, all while facing regular abuse by police or citizens.

Summer surge ahead?

FTDES president Alaa Talbi said migrants who have come for work in Tunisia want to leave, because "neither the legal framework nor the cultural framework favors integration". Deals between Italy and Libya—another key jumping off point for Europe — have likewise "complicated departures", with more migrants trying to leave from Tunisia, he said.

Tunisia's economy has lurched from crisis to crisis since the country's 2011 revolution, most recently due to the coronavirus pandemic and lockdown measures. With seas calmer in the looming summer months, many expect more Tunisians to risk the crossing too. According to Catholic aid agency Caritas, people smugglers are luring migrants with tales that accommodation and jobs are now easy to find in Europe, claiming the virus has decimated the population. Sozo Ange, a 22-year-old Ivorian mother, has been in Tunisia for two years. For her, staying means-at best-life as a cleaning lady, earning enough to share a tiny room with several others and surviving off "soup from out-of-date turkey", she said. —AFP



TUNIS: Aminata Traoure, a 28-year-old refugee from Ivory Coast who survived a shipwreck in early March while trying to reach Europe, stands on a pier by a fishing boat in the Tunisian coastal city of Sfax, about 270km southeast of the capital. — AFP

Northern Ireland marks centenary as crises simmer

DUBLIN: Northern Ireland marked its centenary yesterday with coronavirus restrictions, simmering post-Brexit unrest and a leadership crisis marring the anniversary in the British-ruled province. Northern Ireland—home to 1.9 million people—was created in 1921 as Ireland freed itself from British rule following a war for independence. Commemoration events have been cancelled due to Covid-19 curbs and the weeks leading up to the anniversary have been marred by the worst rioting in the region for years. Meanwhile First Minister Arlene Foster on Wednesday announced her

resignation amidst a reported coup in her Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), where rancor is brewing over the consequences of Brexit.

Throughout its history Northern Ireland has been bitterly contested between pro-UK unionists and pro-Ireland nationalists, who do not recognize its legitimacy and therefore do not celebrate the anniversary. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson nevertheless said that Monday is a "very significant national anniversary", marking "the formation of the United Kingdom as we know it today".

He said it was important that "we pause to reflect on the complex history of the last 100 years".

It is "an important opportunity to come together to celebrate Northern Ireland", he added in a statement released on Twitter. Recent unrest across the province emanated from the unionist community, where Johnson is held in low esteem for allowing a special post-Brexit "protocol" for Northern Ireland which many feel dislocates the region from its place in the UK. At least 88

police officers were injured in a week of riots in April that spread to the nationalist community and saw riot police with water cannons deployed against youths throwing bricks and petrol bombs. Unionists fear the protocol would increase the likelihood of a united Ireland—a prospect which has been a historic source of bloodshed in Northern Ireland. A three-decade-long sectarian conflict known as "The Troubles" saw 3,500 killed over the question of Northern Ireland's destiny. A 1998 peace deal largely ended fighting but a hangover of bitter division remains.

On Sunday Britain's Queen Elizabeth II said "the peace process is rightly credited to a generation of leaders who had the vision and courage to put reconciliation before division." "Above all, the continued peace is a credit to its people, upon whose shoulders the future rests," she said in a statement. The future of Northern Ireland within the UK is ever more uncertain as many feel the fallout of Brexit has altered its constitutional status. —AFP

Germany smashes online child porn network with 400,000 members

BERLIN: German police said yesterday they had shut down "one of the biggest darknet child pornography platforms in the world" and arrested four of its members in a series of raids in mid-April. The platform, named as "Boystown", had existed since 2019, counted over 400,000 members and was "set up for the worldwide exchange of child pornography, in particular images of the abuse of boys", federal police said in a statement.

The darknet forum allowed users to communicate with others and share graphic image and video content which included "serious sexual abuse of toddlers", the statement said. Three men between the ages of 40 and 64 were arrested in seven raids in Germany, while a further suspect was detained in Paraguay on the request of German authorities.

The suspect in Paraguay's Concepcion region, also a German citizen, is to be extradited back to Germany on the basis of an international arrest warrant issued by a court in Frankfurt. The three main suspects, aged 40, 49 and 58 respectively, are accused of having managed the platform as administrators, providing technical support and advice to members on how to avoid being discovered by the authorities. A further suspect, a 64-year-old man from Hamburg, was "one of the platform's most active users", having posted "more than 3,500" times on the platform since signing up to it in 2019, police said.

'Fantastic success'

Investigators added that the months-long, German-instigated operation had been coordinated by Europol and supported by law enforcement in the Netherlands, Sweden, the United States and Canada. Led by federal police and state prosecutors in Frankfurt, a total of seven raids were carried out in the German regions of North-Rhine Westphalia and Bavaria and the city of Hamburg.

Both "Boystown" and other chat platforms were taken offline following the raids. The justice minister for the state of Hesse, Eva Kuehne-Hoermann, hailed what she said was "a fantastic success in the fight against sexual violence against children" for prosecutors in Frankfurt. "The investigators have shown once again that law enforcement works in the darknet and that criminals cannot feel safe there," she added. Darknet sites are invisible to most internet users and can only be accessed by using encryption technology. They have repeatedly been used by criminals to trade drugs, weapons and child pornography. In 2019, a court in Hesse convicted four men of founding and running a darknet child pornography forum. —AFP



A courtroom sketch made yesterday shows Nordahl Lelandais at the courthouse of the French Alps city of Chambéry, on the first day of his trial for the murder of French army Corporal Arthur Noyer in 2017. — AFP

Frenchman accused of child's murder on trial for 2nd killing

CHAMBERY, France: A former French soldier who has admitted killing an eight-year-old girl, a case that shook the country nearly four years ago, appeared in court yesterday on charges he also beat a man to death just a few months before. Nordahl Lelandais, 38, was brought from prison to the courthouse in Chambéry, a town in the French Alps where the victim, also a soldier, was last seen after leaving a nightclub.

He has admitted to killing Corporal Arthur Noyer, 23, in the early hours of April 12, 2017, after picking him up as he hitchhiked. Lelandais has also confessed to killing eight-year-old Maelys de Araujo in August 2017, in a case that horrified France and which is set to go to trial next year.

He has insisted that both deaths were accidental, but his confessions prompted the reopening of investigations into dozens of other disappearances to see if he was linked to these unsolved cases.

More than 100 journalists watched as he entered under heavy police escort, wearing a face mask and a dark cap pulled low over his eyes. "Yes I killed Arthur Noyer, but I never wanted to kill him," Lelandais told the court, where Noyer's parents and brother sat with an oversize portrait of the victim.

Lelandais's lawyers also managed to obtain the withdrawal of one of several psychiatric evaluations, citing potential bias by one of the experts who had discussed the case on popular TV show.

But Bernard Boulloud, lawyer for the Noyer family, said he was confident the jurors would have sufficient insight to Lelandais's personality, "because he will reveal it to us on his own".

Body in the trunk

The trial has been widely anticipated, with mass-market daily Le Parisien putting Lelandais's portrait on its front page under the headline "The Secrets of a Predator". He told police that Noyer had struck him in a parking lot where they had stopped, prompting a fight that ended when Noyer was knocked out.

But prosecutors say Lelandais knew full well he was killing Noyer, and then put his body in the trunk of his car and drove it some 20 kilometers (12 miles) away to dump it on the side of a road.

They have charged him with voluntary manslaughter, which carries a maximum sentence of 30 years in prison. Investigators only linked Lelandais to Noyer's death after he was arrested over the murder of Maelys, who vanished in the early hours of August 27, 2017, while attending a wedding near Chambéry with her parents. Police searched for months for the girl before arresting Lelandais, who was also a guest at the wedding. He finally led them to her remains in February 2018 after traces of her blood were found in his car. The two cases sparked fears that Lelandais could be involved in dozens of other unsolved disappearances in the region, and investigators reopened several cases after reviewing his background and movements over several years. Despite three years of inquiries, however, and psychiatric exams that have revealed signs of Lelandais's "pathological lying", no evidence has emerged to link Lelandais to other cases. The trial over Noyer's killing is set to run until May 12. His trial over Maelys's death is expected next year. — AFP