

International

Harris ends Asia tour with fresh jab at China

US to push back against Beijing's claims in disputed Asian waters

HANOI: Vice President Kamala Harris launched a new broadside against China as she ended her Southeast Asian tour in Hanoi yesterday, warning the US would continue to push back against Beijing's claims in disputed Asian waters. The comments came on the final day of a regional trip in which Washington has sought to reset relations in Asia after the turbulent Donald Trump years and stress its commitment to Southeast Asian allies.

During the trip, Harris had already accused Beijing twice of bullying its neighbors in the resource-rich South China Sea — and yesterday she again took aim at the Asian giant. “We’re going to speak up when there are actions that Beijing takes that threaten the rules-based international order... such as activity in the South China Sea,” Harris said.

“Freedom of navigation... is a vital issue for this region.” Harris’ Vietnam visit had been slammed by critics as tone-deaf given the parallels between this week’s chaotic scenes in Kabul and the 1975 evacuation of Saigon.

Washington had also faced questions over its reliability following the US withdrawal and Taliban takeover in Afghanistan. But Harris has tried to steer clear of the historical parallels, instead emphasizing American commitment to the

region by opening a Southeast Asia branch of the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in Hanoi and donating a million COVID-19 vaccines to Vietnam.

“In the years ahead we will be back time and time again,” she told journalists yesterday.

Vietnam is facing its most serious wave of the pandemic so far—with both Hanoi and commercial

“ Washington doesn’t seek conflict ”

hub Ho Chi Minh City in lockdown for weeks—and the gift was widely praised on social media.

Warning to China

Harris insisted yesterday that the US did “not seek conflict” with Beijing, but it would “do what we can to make sure that we stay committed to our partners” on issues such as the South China



HANOI: US Vice President Kamala Harris (C) applauds staff as she departs Vietnam at Noi Bai International Airport, following her first official visit to Asia, in Hanoi yesterday. —AFP

Sea. Four Southeast Asian states including Vietnam have competing claims over the waterway through which trillions of dollars in shipping trade passes annually. China has been accused of de-

ploying military hardware including anti-ship and surface-to-air missiles there, and ignored a 2016 international tribunal decision that rejected its historical claim over most of the waters. —AFP

Hong Kong ‘patriot’ committee removes opposition lawmaker

HONG KONG: A powerful new Hong Kong committee tasked with vetting politicians and officials for their loyalty disqualified an opposition lawmaker for the first time yesterday, as authorities purge its institutions of anyone deemed disloyal to Beijing. Cheng Chung-tai, one of just two opposition figures left in the city’s legislature, was deemed disloyal on the basis of his previous statements and behavior, chief secretary John Lee, who heads the vetting committee, told reporters.

“To those who pretend to... bear allegiance to the government, I will not be deceived by their flowery speeches and their attempts to sugarcoat,” Lee said, adding Cheng had “lost his seat with immediate effect.” Lee did not detail what specifically Cheng had said or done that had led to his disqualification.

China is rapidly recasting Hong Kong in its own authoritarian image in the wake of huge democracy protests two years ago. It has blanketed the business hub in a national security law that has criminalized much dissent and rolled out a campaign to ensure only so-called “patriots” can play a role in its politics.

That campaign has included a sweeping overhaul of the city’s already limited elections, drastically reducing the number of directly elected seats and empowering a new committee to vet anyone for their political loyalty. Only one non-government loyalist is now left in Hong Kong’s partially elected legislature—an independent who represents the city’s medical sector. Cheng, 37, was the only opposition lawmaker who did not resign in protest last year after four other legislators were disqualified. —AFP

Mysterious ‘Havana’ syndrome imperils US diplomats

WASHINGTON: A mysterious affliction dubbed “Havana Syndrome” that has brought severe headaches, nausea and possible brain damage to US diplomats has many officials convinced they are under sustained attack using electronic weapons. On Tuesday, US Vice President Kamala Harris delayed for several hours a trip to Vietnam after the US embassy in Hanoi reported a possible case involving “acoustic incidents” there, raising concern she could be a target.

Ultimately Harris did go to Hanoi, and the State Department said it was investigating a case of what the US government officially dubs an “anomalous health incident” or AHI. It was the most recent of dozens of such cases reported by US diplomats and intelligence officers since 2016, first in Cuba, then in China, Germany, Australia, Taiwan and in Washington itself.

In July, the New Yorker magazine reported there have been dozens of cases among US officials in Vienna, Austria since the beginning of 2021. Amid concerns a powerful rival, possibly Russia, is mounting the attacks, the State Department has warned its thousands of diplomats of the threat while also carrying out extensive medical checks on those heading abroad so as to better measure any effects of future attacks. “We take each report we receive extremely seriously and are working to ensure that affected employees get the care and support they need,” a department spokesperson said.

The number of reported incidents among US officials has been kept under wraps.

After the Hanoi incident, former CIA operative Marc Polymeropoulos, himself a victim in Moscow in 2017, said the volume of attacks appeared to be mounting. “It would seem to me that our adversaries are sending a clear message that they are not only able to get at our intelligence officers, diplomats and US military officers,” Polymeropoulos told the Cipher Brief Open Source Report on Wednesday. “This is a message that they can get at our senior VIPs.”

Microwave attack?

The syndrome has almost uniformly affected US officials. However, in 2017, Canadian diplomats and their families in Havana reported several of their own cases, months after the first among Americans.

In some cases, people have reported hearing focused, high-pitched or sharp sounds that left them nauseated. Sometimes the afflicted had bloody noses, headaches and other symptoms that resembled concussions.

The incidents were little understood and sparked theories they were caused by a weapon that used focused microwaves, ultrasound, poison or even were a reaction to crickets. But for several years, senior government officials dismissed the complaints, judging them to be the symptoms of people under stress or reacting with hysteria to unknown stimuli. Still, the administration of former president Donald Trump pulled US staff out of Havana and expelled 15 Cuban diplomats from Washington, hinting that either the Cuban or Russian government was behind the attacks. At the end of 2020, the National Academy of Sciences studied the available cases and concluded they appeared to represent a distinctive set of symptoms unlike any other known disorder. —AFP