

International

UK's Johnson visits Scotland as independence support mounts

PM praises UK's collective response to coronavirus

LONDON: Prime Minister Boris Johnson headed to Scotland yesterday to praise the United Kingdom's collective response to coronavirus, in a bid to counter record support for independence. Johnson wants to highlight the British government's role in Scotland tackling the pandemic, from deploying the army to help roll out vaccines to providing additional financial support. The visit comes with polling indicating that Scots overwhelmingly think First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP), has done a better job at handling the crisis than Johnson.

Twenty consecutive polls have suggested majority support for independence, and the SNP has published an 11-point "roadmap to a referendum" as well as a newly-formed "independence task-force". Johnson has insisted the last independence referendum in 2014, which saw Scots back staying in the UK by 55 to 45 percent, was a once-in-a-generation vote and repeatedly rejected calls for him to allow another vote.

As well as the backdrop of the independence issue, Johnson faces another row with Sturgeon, who has questioned if his trip breaches coronavirus lockdown rules. Sturgeon said she was "not ecstatic" about the visit, adding that leaders should stick to the same rules as the general public about making only essential journeys.

"People like me and Boris Johnson have to be in work for reasons people understand, but we don't

have to travel across the UK. We have a duty to lead by example," she said Wednesday. Johnson's Downing Street office hit back, insisting it was "a fundamental role of the PM to be the physical representative of the UK government" and that it was "right that he's visible and accessible for communities and businesses and the public".

Senior minister Michael Gove, a Scot who chairs a weekly sub-cabinet meeting on preserving the UK, added that the visit would garner valuable insight about the government's pandemic response.

"It's also important the prime minister hears from those on the frontline what is going well and what needs to improve," he told Sky News.

'Benefits of cooperation'

The devolved governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are responsible for their own health policies, and the pandemic has thrust local leaders and their administrations into the spotlight more than usual. With each administration dictating their response, they have often pitted themselves against London, which sets policy for England, and provided a glimpse into how independence could operate.

Despite similarly grim case counts and virus mortality rates to the rest of Britain, Sturgeon has won praise for her handling of the crisis and performances in daily press conferences. In contrast, Johnson has been vehemently criticized for repeatedly reacting too slowly as the crisis has evolved,



LONDON: A handout photograph released by the UK Parliament shows Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson taking part in the weekly Prime Minister's Questions, in a hybrid, socially distanced session at the House of Commons in London on Wednesday. —AFP

and Britain now has one of the highest death tolls globally. However during his visit, he will stress that the UK government has provided pivotal support, in particular in emergency response and testing, alongside the vaccine drive and funding.

"The great benefits of cooperation across the whole of the UK have never been clearer than since the beginning of this pandemic," Johnson will say,

according to his office. The SNP said the trip was evidence of a "prime minister in panic" and accused him of "mimicking Donald Trump's explicit attempts to block democracy". "The longer Boris Johnson reads from the Trump playbook of democracy denial, the more support for Scottish independence will grow," SNP deputy leader Keith Brown said. —AFP

Germany plans travel halt from virus variant countries

BERLIN: Germany is banning most travellers from countries hardest hit by coronavirus variants, the interior minister said yesterday, to stop the strains from reversing recent progress on lowering infections. "At the moment within the government, we are coordinating towards the aim of refusing inbound travel from mutation areas," said Horst Seehofer.

"We are concentrating these travel restrictions on mutation areas, that are at the moment Britain, Portugal, South Africa and Brazil." The emergence of new virus variants in Britain, Brazil and South Africa, deemed more infectious than the original strain, has fuelled concern at a time when many nations are struggling to rein in the pandemic. Portugal, which has strong air links with Brazil, has also recently reported high infection numbers after coming through the first wave of the virus relatively unscathed. Seehofer said talks were ongoing to decide which category of travellers might be granted exemptions. These would likely include returning Germans as well as those who work in freight, as cargo flights should not be disrupted. Further, with fast-moving infection developments, officials are also looking at how to define what would qualify as a "mutation area". —AFP

San Francisco to scrub Lincoln, Washington from 44 schools

SAN FRANCISCO: Presidents George Washington and Abraham Lincoln are no longer in favor in San Francisco, where the school board has voted to change the name of 44 schools it says bear the monikers of people associated with racism, slavery or colonization. The move, which has sparked much controversy locally, dates back to the creation of a commission in May 2018 to revise the names of public schools, long before statues of Christopher Columbus or figures from the US' Confederate south were toppled by anti-racism protesters in the wake of George Floyd's police killing.

The commission created a list of 44 schools to be renamed, such as that bearing the name of Spanish missionary Junipero Serra. Among them are schools named for presidents Washington and Thomas Jefferson,

both of whom owned slaves, as well as Francis Scott Key, the author of the US national anthem. Surprisingly, Abraham Lincoln—the symbol of the abolition of slavery in the US—is also under fire, accused by some of having played a role in the massacre of Native American tribes.

Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein, 87, is also on the list, which the school board approved in a six-to-one vote. The commission accuses her of replacing a vandalized Confederate flag that flew among approximately 20 others in front of San Francisco's city hall, while she was mayor in the 1980s. The flag, which originated in the pro-slavery south during the US Civil War, has become a symbol of racial discrimination and white supremacy. The decision to rename schools has sparked sharp criticism, including from the current mayor of San Francisco, London Breed. Breed, who is the city's first Black, female mayor, criticized the school board's decision to focus its energy on renaming schools at a moment when the education system is facing an uphill battle to reopen amid the coronavirus pandemic as well as hardships associated with virtual homeschooling. —AFP

Facebook backs away from heated political talk

SAN FRANCISCO: Facebook is seeking to "turn down the temperature" on its sprawling platform by reducing the kind of divisive and inflammatory political talk it has long hosted. Facebook has been pounded with criticism that it not only hasn't done enough to curb misinformation and vitriol on its network, but that its algorithm actually tended to encourage such posts because of the attention they grab.

The social media giant will no longer recommend politics-themed groups to users, Facebook chief Mark Zuckerberg said Wednesday, making perma-

nent a measure put in place during the combative US election won by President Joe Biden. The Silicon Valley-based internet giant is also working on ways to reduce the amount of political content served up in users' news feeds by its automated systems.

"We're still going to enable people to engage in political groups and discussions if they want to," Zuckerberg said. But he added the decision to reduce political content in users' main news feeds is part of a push "to turn down the temperature and discourage divisive conversation."

The social media giant has long been a fertile ground for users to tangle over opposing views or surround themselves with those who agree emphatically. "But one of the top pieces of feedback that we are hearing from our community right now is that people don't want politics and fighting to take over their experience on our services," Zuckerberg said in an earnings call. —AFP