

International

Biden joins battle for Senate as top Republican accepts win

Russian, Brazilian, Mexican leader congratulate president-elect

ATLANTA: President-elect Joe Biden threw his weight behind the Democratic battle for control of the US Senate on Tuesday, as his White House win was finally acknowledged by top Republicans and holdout foreign leaders. Biden flew into Georgia—a southern state he won in an upset against President Donald Trump—to host a rally for two Democratic candidates in runoff races that will determine the Senate's balance of power.

"Honk for your next United States senators Jon Ossoff and Rev. Raphael Warnock," Biden told the crowd at the drive-in event in Atlanta as he urged voters to turn out in force on January 5.

"Send me these two men, and we will control the Senate!" One day after the Electoral College affirmed Biden's victory, attention shifted to the looming Senate battle—and to the shape of the incoming administration, as Biden also announced he had nominated Pete Buttigieg, a former mayor and presidential rival, as secretary of transportation.

Buttigieg would be the first openly gay person confirmed by the Senate to a presidential cabinet post-in line with Biden's pledge to usher in the most diverse cabinet ever when he takes office on January 20. And while Trump still refuses to concede—continuing to tweet baseless allegations of mass fraud that have been rejected in dozens of lawsuits—top Senate Republican Mitch McConnell finally broke his silence with a message to the president-elect.

"The Electoral College has spoken. So today I want to congratulate President-elect Joe Biden," McConnell said on the Senate floor, adding Americans can also "take pride" that they will have their first female vice president in Kamala Harris.

Biden told reporters before flying to Georgia that he had a "good" phone conversation with McConnell, a longtime Senate colleague.

"I told him that while we disagree on a lot of things, there are things we can work together on," Biden said. The Electoral College confirmation triggered an acknowledgement of Biden's win from Russian President Vladimir Putin, who said he was "ready for collaboration" with the Democrat. Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro and Mexico's Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador—who had both waited until now to recognize the president-elect—also sent their congratulations.

Turn the page

Trump, in unprecedented fashion, has yet to acknowledge his defeat in the chaotic election that will see him exit the White House after a single four-year term. In the wake of McConnell's message to the president-elect Tuesday, Trump suggested he would continue to fight the results and aired unproven claims that November's poll was "rigged".

"Too soon to give up," he said in a second tweet. "Republican Party must finally learn to fight. People are angry!" But Biden urged the divided country to "turn the page" as he welcomed the Electoral College vote on Monday, saying US democracy proved "resilient" against Trump's "abuse of power."

He praised voters for casting ballots in record numbers despite fears of COVID-19 and "enormous political pressure, verbal abuse and even threats of physical violence."

The White House transition is occurring with the coronavirus pandemic surging, pushing US



WILMINGTON, Delaware: US President-elect Joe Biden waves as he arrives at Newcastle Airport in Wilmington, Delaware on Tuesday. — AFP

COVID-19 deaths above 300,000. While critical winter months lie ahead, a bright spot has emerged with health care workers receiving the first doses of the coronavirus vaccine distributed in the nation.

And with top infectious disease expert Anthony Fauci recommending Biden and Harris quickly take the vaccine, the president-elect said they would receive the shot in public view.

Although the door has all but shut on his efforts to overturn the vote results, Trump has remained defiant. In a threatening move against Republican leaders in Georgia, where he has made baseless claims of massive voter fraud, he retweeted a pro-Trump lawyer who posted a picture of Georgia's governor and secretary of state, saying "they will soon be going to jail." — AFP

News in brief

27,000 artefacts seized in France

PARIS: French authorities have seized a "priceless" haul of over 27,000 archaeological artefacts ranging from Bronze Age bracelets to Roman coins that had been secretly amassed by a single person in the east of the country, customs said yesterday. The seizure of the 27,400 objects was the result of a year-long investigation conducted by French customs, Belgian authorities and the French culture ministry. The hoarder, who has not been named and now faces a criminal probe, had built up the collection for personal and trading purposes, the French customs service said. He had amassed the collection himself using metal detectors as well as what appears to be a deep archaeological knowledge. — AFP

EU okays more Belarus sanctions

BRUSSELS: EU ambassadors agreed yesterday further economic sanctions on Belarus over its brutal crackdown on opposition protesters, targeting 29 individuals and seven firms or organizations, diplomats said. The measures, to be formalized with the publication of the list today, will be the third round of sanctions the European bloc has imposed on the regime of Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko. Lukashenko, his son, and more than 50 Belarus officials are already under EU sanctions. — AFP

EU members to start vaccine jabs

BRUSSELS: The EU's 27 member countries aim to start COVID-19 vaccinations on "the same day" in a sign of unity, European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen said yesterday. Her statement to the European Parliament came as pressure mounted on the bloc to catch up with the United States and Britain, which have already started inoculating people with a vaccine made by Pfizer and BioNTech. "To get to the end of the pandemic, we will need up to 70 percent of the population vaccinated. This is a huge task, a big task. So let's start as soon as possible with the vaccination together, as 27, with a start at the same day," von der Leyen told MEPs. — AFP

Russia frees jailed activist

MOSCOW: A Russian opposition activist who was jailed for repeatedly violating protest laws during mass anti-Kremlin demonstrations last year was released from detention yesterday. Konstantin Kotov, an activist and computer programmer, was convicted in September last year under a 2014 law that introduced stiffer sentences for anyone caught taking part in unsanctioned demonstrations more than twice in six months. "I'm delighted that my detention is over," he said. "We need to continue working on protecting human rights in Russia, one way or another," he said. — AFP

Ban on 'conversion therapy' sought

LONDON: More than 300 religious leaders from 35 countries yesterday called for a ban on "conversion therapies" which attempt to change an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity. The call for an end to the practice, often done in the name of a religious faith, was issued in a statement by the British Ozzanne Foundation before a London conference. — AFP

Lovesick Scot jailed for breaching COVID rules on jet-ski odyssey

LONDON: A lovesick Scottish man who bought a jet-ski so he could evade lockdown measures to visit his girlfriend in the Isle of Man has been jailed for breaching coronavirus restrictions, reports said.

Dale McLaughlan from Ayrshire in southern Scotland met his girlfriend while working as a roofer on the island in the Irish Sea in September, the BBC reported Tuesday. Coronavirus restrictions on the tax haven-famous for the annual Tourist Trophy motorcycle race—mean non-residents currently require special permission to land on the island.

But after returning to Scotland when his contract ended, McLaughlan was denied permission to re-enter the island, the BBC said. Undeterred, the 28-

year-old bought a jet-ski and set off last Friday to make the 40-kilometre (25-mile) sea-crossing by stealth. He had never ridden a jet-ski before and expected the journey to take around 40 minutes, prosecutors told a court in Douglas, the island's main town, according to the BBC.

But the journey across the choppy waters—which have an average December temperature of around eight degrees Celsius (46 degrees Fahrenheit) according to Ireland's meteorological service—took over four hours. He then had to walk 24 kilometers (15 miles) to his girlfriend's home.

On Sunday he was arrested by police after they found out he had arrived illegally and visited nightclubs with his girlfriend. Deputy High Bailiff Christopher Arrowsmith said McLaughlan had made a "deliberate and intentional attempt to circumnavigate" the border restrictions, and jailed him for four weeks, the BBC said. McLaughlan's defense lawyer said he had suffered from depression at not being able to see his partner. — AFP



A photo posted on the internet of McLaughlan arriving in Ramsey harbor, Isle of Man, after a four-hour trip by jet ski across the chilly and choppy Irish Sea, before walking 24 kilometers to see his girlfriend. — AFP

Terror, then safety: How a boy survived Nigeria abduction

ANKARA, Nigeria: Gunmen arrived late Friday at his school in Kankara, northwestern Nigeria, just as he and his classmates were about to go to bed. Their first thought was that the men were vigilantes-civilians who take on a policing role—"so, we were not scared," the 18-year-old told AFP.

But then, heavy firing started. "We became terrified. Some of us ran to the perimeter fence trying to escape, while others hid inside." "They kept shouting we should come back, that they were in the school to rescue us. And most of us came back."

In an operation that left the country reeling, hundreds of students were rounded up that day at the all-boys Government Science secondary school and taken away. The disappearance was initially blamed on so-called bandits-criminal groups in the region who for years have terrorized

communities by killing and abducting people for ransom. But on Tuesday, Boko Haram, the dreaded group that kidnapped hundreds of schoolgirls in Chibok in 2014, claimed responsibility.

The abduction took place hundreds of miles (kilometers) away from Boko Haram's stronghold in northeast Nigeria, sparking fears of a massive advance in the jihadists' decade-long insurgency.

Lanky and soft-spoken, Ahmad explained how the students were rounded up under a tree, split into three groups and led through the forest. "We had no footwear," he said, his feet swathed in black socks after they became riddled with thorns. The teenager said the group trekked for hours, heading towards neighboring Zamfara state.

"They flogged us with tree branches and the flat side of their machetes,"



KANKARA: Parents wait outside the government science secondary school where gunmen abducted students in Kankara, in northwestern Katsina state, Nigeria. — AFP

he recalled. But then came a stroke of luck. He and a friend were able to hide behind a bush. They waited for complete silence to prevail before they retraced their steps back home to safety. The government has not immediately reacted to Boko Haram claim or confirmed its authenticity, and the

number of missing students remains unclear — 320 or 333, according to two accounts by officials, while locals in Kankara put it at more than 500. Among parents of missing students, many said they had long feared an attack, given the grip on the region by criminal gangs. — AFP

Hostile climate has LGBT Hungarians eyeing emigration

BUDAPEST: As Hungary intensifies its crackdown on gay rights, including an effective ban on same-sex adoption, some LGBT Hungarians are close to quitting the country while others have already left.

"It motivates me to leave, that I may not be able to have the life with my partner that we dream about, to maybe have family in the future," Barbara Pongracz, a 31-year-old recruitment consultant, told AFP.

"I am just fed up with this negative environment," said Pongracz, who also DJs at LGBT events. Prime Minister Viktor Orban has enacted a socially conservative policy agenda in recent years, shaping Hungary into what he calls a bastion against liberal ideologies. On Tuesday, parliament passed a constitutional amendment declaring that "the mother is a woman, the father is a man" as the government doubles down on traditional definitions of family and marriage.

Another new law says that only married couples can adopt children, practically excluding LGBT Hungarians as gay marriage is not permitted in Hungary. The legislative wave this year has been accompanied by rising anti-gay sentiment in the media, sometimes voiced by senior politicians.

Orban himself urged gay people to "leave our children alone" in October. Only weeks later, Jozsef Szajer, a co-founder of Orban's ruling Fidesz party and the main author of Hungary's rewritten 2012 constitution, resigned as an MEP after Belgian police caught him fleeing from a gay orgy in Brussels that breached lockdown rules. "I'm not surprised that there are gays in Fidesz," said Pongracz. "That makes it all the more disturbing how they talk about LGBT people."

Polarization

"The LGBT community has become a scapegoat," said Marcell Lenart, a 39-year-old freelance translator, who says attitudes on the street have "polarized" recently. "If I hold hands with my partner in public people now either demonstrate their progressiveness or they are openly homophobic," Lenart said. "But we just want to be left alone," he said.

Faced with the raft of legislation, especially the ban on same-sex parenting and the recent dissolution of an equality authority that handled workplace and housing discrimination cases, Lenart has also considered leaving Hungary. "I'm not thinking of adopting right now, but if that changed soon it is upsetting that basically I cannot do that here," he said.

Harassment

Ivett Ordog, 40, made her decision to emigrate shortly after another law was passed in May that reversed regulations allowing transgender citizens to



A woman takes part in an LGBT Pride Parade in Budapest

change the gender listed on legal documents. Previously a spokesperson for the "Drop 33" campaign that opposed the legislation, she moved to Berlin in August, where she works as an engineering manager.

"I feel more calm here, before moving I started developing psychological issues," she told AFP. Ordog says the new law puts trans people at risk of getting harassed in situations when they must show their identity papers, forcing them to come out as trans for example when collecting a package at the post office or accessing public services. — AFP