

## International

# Biden to allow up to 62,500 refugees into US after criticism

## New cap could help US reach the goal of 125,000 refugee admissions

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden announced yesterday, after coming under fierce criticism, that he was raising the maximum number of refugees allowed into the United States this year to 62,500 — up from the 15,000 cap imposed by his predecessor Donald Trump.

The change follows backlash from allies over Biden's earlier decision to keep the Trump-era limits—a politically costly moment of confusion that stood out in a White House notable for its iron discipline in its first three months. “This erases the historically low number set by the previous administration of 15,000, which did not reflect America's values as a nation that welcomes and supports refugees,” Biden said in a statement.

“The new admissions cap will also reinforce efforts that are already underway to expand the United States' capacity to admit refugees, so that we can reach the goal of 125,000 refugee admissions that I intend to set for the coming fiscal year.”

The program is only for refugees selected by US security and intelligence agencies from United Nations camps around the world. The course correction was quickly welcomed by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which is controlled by Biden's Democratic party.

“I welcome the Biden administration's announcement that it will increase the number of refugees allowed to be resettled in the United States. This is an important step in continuing our proud, bipartisan tradition of providing refugees protection through resettlement,” the committee chairman, Senator Bob Menendez, tweeted. The American Civil Liberties Union, a powerful advocacy group, also voiced approval, saying that the country's “reputation” was at stake.

“We are pleased to see President Biden has abandoned the Trump administration's abysmal

refugee goal and recommitted to prioritizing helping people who are fleeing persecution around the globe,” ACLU representative Manar Waheed said. “We recognize that the goal may not be easy and it requires rebuilding a system that was decimated by the Trump administration, but candidate Biden promised,” Waheed said. “He must fulfill that promise, lives are at stake.”

### Biden needs party unity

Trump clamped down on refugees as part of the hardline border policies at the heart of his nationalist political platform. Biden campaigned on promises to restore more traditional US attitudes. But he then backtracked after his government ran into difficulties in handling a surge of migrants entering the country illegally or claiming asylum at the Mexican border.

Last month, the White House said it needed more time to “rebuild” the post-Trump refugee program and would therefore keep the cap at 15,000 for the year. After a top Democrat and refugee aid groups slammed Biden's target as “appalling” and “deeply disappointing,” the White House issued a statement hours later saying the low number was only provisional.

In another shift from Trump's policies, Biden announced in April that quotas were being expanded for refugees from Central America, the Middle East and Africa, while also opening the doors to three mostly Muslim countries—Somalia, Syria and Yemen. With Monday's announcement, the White House will hope to have calmed the political waters among Democrats just when it needs party unity to push forward on huge proposed social and infrastructure spending plans in an almost evenly divided Congress. “We are amid the largest global refugee crisis in history, and after four years of slashing admissions to the low-



NORFOLK, Virginia: US President Joe Biden departs after speaking on the American Jobs Plan, following a tour of Tidewater Community College in Norfolk, Virginia Monday. —AFP

est point on record, we need to return to our leadership position,” another Democratic senator, Tim Kaine, said.

“I am heartened by today's announcement that moved toward upholding our values of accepting refugees.” Trump set the 15,000 cap nearly a month before the November 2020 presidential election, which he lost. Under his predecessor, Democrat Barack Obama, with whom

Biden served as vice president, an average of 100,000 people were welcomed into the United States each year. “It is in our DNA as a nation to open our door to those seeking refuge,” said US secretary of state Antony Blinken in response to Biden's announcement Monday. “It remains in our national interest to treat individuals applying for these programs fairly and with dignity and respect.” —AFP

### News in brief

#### Ex-AFP news chief Leridon dies

PARIS: French journalist Michele Leridon, who broke through glass ceilings to become the first woman appointed as global news director of Agence France-Presse, has died suddenly at the age of 62, it was announced yesterday. Leridon spent nearly 40 years at the agency before becoming a member of the Superior Audiovisual Council (CSA) which oversees French TV and radio. “A woman of conviction, Michele Leridon was a great journalist, unanimously respected for her rich experience and great intellectual rigor,” the CSA said in a statement. A cause of death was not given. Leridon joined AFP in 1981 and held many posts in Europe and Africa. —AFP

#### Egypt buys 30 Rafale fighter jets

CAIRO: Egypt's military has confirmed it ordered 30 Rafale jets from French defence firm Dassault Aviation to shore up “national security”. The order, which follows the 2015 purchase of 24 Rafale jets, will be financed through a 10-year loan, the military said in a statement late Monday. Investigative site Disclose had reported earlier Monday that the order was part of a secret mega-defence deal worth almost four billion euros (\$4.8 billion). Egypt is the world's third biggest arms importer after Saudi Arabia and India, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. —AFP

#### Lebanon, Israel talks resume over border

NAQURA, Lebanon: Lebanon and Israel resumed US-mediated negotiations over their disputed maritime border yesterday after a months-long hiatus, in efforts to clear the way for offshore oil and gas exploration. The talks, between countries still technically at war, kicked off at the UN base in the town of Naqura in southern Lebanon, the National News Agency said. Washington said Friday they were to be brokered by US diplomat John Desrocher, and called the resumption of talks “a positive step towards a long-awaited resolution”. Lebanon and Israel last year took part in indirect US-brokered talks to discuss demarcation. —AFP

#### Germany's far-right crime rate jumps

BERLIN: The number of crimes committed by right-wing extremists in post-war Germany jumped to its highest level ever recorded in 2020, according to official figures released yesterday. Police recorded 23,604 crimes of a far-right nature last year, a jump of over five percent on the previous year, and the highest figure since records began in 2001. “Right-wing extremism remains the biggest threat to our country,” said Interior Minister Horst Seehofer as he presented the figures at a press conference yesterday. He added that right-wing violence had left a “trail of blood” through Germany in recent years, citing deadly far-right crimes such as the murder of pro-refugee politician Walter Lübcke in 2019 and the 2020 racist attack in Hanau which killed nine people.

#### Turkey probes Istanbul's mayor

ISTANBUL: Turkish prosecutors have launched an investigation into Istanbul Mayor Ekrem Imamoglu over his “disrespectful” behavior during a visit to a shrine, officials said yesterday. Imamoglu, who is a potential election challenger to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan from the main opposition CHP party, was pictured with his hands folded behind his back during a visit to a tomb of an Ottoman sultan last year. He was attending a ceremony marking the anniversary of Istanbul's conquest from the Byzantine Empire in 1453. Interior ministry spokesman Ismail Catakli said the probe was opened by city prosecutors over allegations that the mayor was “disrespectful to the tomb of Fatih the Conqueror”. —AFP

## G7 seeks common front on China in first talks in 2 years

LONDON: The Group of Seven wealthy democracies yesterday discussed how to form a common front towards an increasingly assertive China in the foreign ministers' first in-person talks in two years.

Backing US President Joe Biden's calls for a deeper alliance of democracies, host Britain invited guests including India, South Korea and Australia for talks in central London stretched out over three days.

After a welcome dinner Monday focused on the nuclear programs of Iran and North Korea, the foreign ministers opened formal talks at Lancaster House, a West End mansion, welcoming one another with COVID-friendly elbow-bumps and minimal staff. The G7 devoted its first session Tuesday to China, whose growing military and economic clout, and willingness to exert its influence at home and abroad have increasingly unnerved Western democracies.

## Nigeria army rules out takeover from Buhari

ABUJA: Nigeria's armed forces have dismissed suggestions that they should take over from President Muhammadu Buhari, who is facing mounting pressure over the country's worsening insecurity. It was not the first time Nigeria's armed forces have issued a statement backing Buhari, but the latest has come after weeks of criticism of the 78-year-old former general's failures to stem the protracted security crisis.

From a jihadist insurgency in the northeast to herder-farmer clashes in the center, banditry in the northwest and separatist tensions in the southeast, Buhari's armed forces appear to be struggling to curb insecurity. In a statement late Monday, the armed forces said they would continue to “fully” support the government, remain politically neu-

## Tigray war rips thousands of kids from parents

ADDIS ABABA: Ethiopia's Tigray war has separated thousands of children from their parents, and many now face “dire” and dangerous conditions in displacement camps, the charity Save the Children said yesterday.

“Many of these children were separated from their parents while fleeing for their lives during the conflict. Others have lost parents to the violence,” the group said in a statement marking six months since fighting began. Some children are “not in safe care arrangements,” housed “in single rooms where more than 50 people sleep,” it said, pointing to the risk that they

“It is not our purpose to try to contain China or to hold China down,” US Secretary of State Antony Blinken told reporters Monday. “What we are trying to do is to uphold the international rules-based order that our countries have invested so much in over so many decades to the benefit, I would argue, not just of our own citizens, but of people around the world—including, by the way, China.”

Blinken pledged “robust cooperation” with Britain in pressuring China over the Xinjiang region, where Beijing's incarceration of one million Uyghurs and other Muslims has been labeled genocide by Washington, and over a clampdown against civil rights in Hong Kong.

### Cooperation where possible

British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab called for “holding Beijing to the commitments that they've made”, including on Hong Kong, which was promised a separate system before London handed over the colony in 1997. But in line with the Biden administration, which has shifted the tone if not substance of former president Donald Trump's hawkish stance on China, Raab also called for “finding

and protect Nigeria's democracy.

“Let it be stated categorically that the Armed Forces of Nigeria remain fully committed to the present administration and all associated democratic institutions,” army spokesman Onyema Nwachukwu said in a statement. “We shall continue to remain apolitical, subordinate to the civil authority, firmly loyal to the President, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, President Muhammadu Buhari and the 1999 Constitution as amended,” it said.

Last week, lawmakers had urged Buhari to declare a nationwide state of emergency after a month of almost daily attacks, kidnappings and killings across Africa's most populous country.

The military statement referred specifically to comments made by Robert Clarke, a prominent lawyer and social commentator. He had said the country was on the brink of collapse and suggested the political leadership hand power to the military so that the security forces could be restructured.

could be exposed to physical or sexual violence. The UN's International Organization for Migration reported in mid-April that more than one million people were displaced in Tigray, including 4,056 “separated” and 917 “unaccompanied” children.

That data was collected in March, meaning the true figures could be higher now. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed sent troops into Tigray last November to detain and disarm leaders of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the regional ruling party that once dominated national politics. He said the move came in response to TPLF attacks on federal army camps. Abiy declared victory after federal forces took the regional capital Mekele, but TPLF leaders remain on the run and fighting continues.

Save the Children is far from the only group sounding the alarm about sexual violence, which has been rampant during the conflict. The International Rescue Committee said Monday that rape was “being used as a

weapon,” and that women and girls faced “widespread abuse including mass rape and exploitation.”

“Women are having to engage in sexually exploitative relationships, receiving small amounts of money, food and/or shelter to survive and feed their children,” said Victor Odero, policy and advocacy adviser for the International Rescue Committee.

The US and EU are clamoring for the withdrawal of Eritrean troops, who have been implicated in some of the worst attacks on civilians documented so far, including brutal gang rapes.

Eritrea denies involvement in atrocities. World leaders are also ramping up pressure on Abiy's government to pursue a political resolution to the conflict, but Ethiopian officials say fighting is minimal and normalcy is returning. Over the weekend Abiy's Council of Ministers approved a resolution classifying the TPLF as a terrorist group, dealing a blow to the prospect of peace talks. —AFP



LONDON: European High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs, Josep Borrell (left) arrives for a bi-lateral meeting during the G7 foreign ministers meeting in London yesterday. —AFP

constructive ways to work with China in a sensible and positive manner where that's possible”—including on climate change.

“We want to see China stepping up to the plate and playing its full role,” Raab said. The nations of the G7 — which also include Canada, France,

Germany, Italy and Japan—mostly share concerns about China but some have different approaches. Japan has historic tensions with China but has held off on joining Western nations with sanctions, wary of inflaming relations with its giant neighbor and trading partner. —AFP



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Opposition figures like Bukola Saraki and Nobel winner and playwright Wole Soyinka have also urged Buhari to seek external help or resign. Buhari met with his top security chiefs last week and again on Tuesday to discuss the country's violence.

“We shall continue to discharge our constitutional responsibilities professionally, especially in protecting the country's democracy, defense of the territorial integrity of the country as well as protection of lives and properties of citizens,” the military statement said. —AFP