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WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden meets with China's President Xi Jinping during a virtual summit from the Roosevelt Room of the White House in Washington, DC. — AFP

Biden, Xi at loggerheads on Taiwan

US, China leaders trade warnings on Taiwan at virtual summit

WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden and China's Xi Jinping traded strong warnings on the future of Taiwan at a virtual summit meant to establish "guardrails" against conflict between their rival superpowers. The video-link summit, which took place late Monday in Washington and yesterday in Beijing, lasted a "longer than expected" three and a half hours, a senior US official told reporters. "The conversation was respectful and straightforward."

While the goal was to settle an increasingly volatile relationship between the giant economic and geopolitical competitors, tension over Taiwan - a self-governing democracy claimed by China - loomed large. Chinese state media reported after the summit that Xi cautioned Biden that encouraging Taiwanese independence would be "playing with fire." "Some people in the US intend to 'use Taiwan to control China.' This trend is very dangerous and is like playing with fire, and those who play with fire will get burned," he was quoted as saying by Xinhua news agency.

The White House readout after the summit was considerably more measured, but between the lines, Biden's pushback against Beijing's increasingly aggressive posture toward Taiwan was clear. "On Taiwan, President Biden underscored that the United States... strongly opposes unilateral efforts to change the status quo or undermine peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait," the White House statement said.

The statement reiterated longstanding US policy that does not recognize Taiwan's independence but supports defense of the island. According to the US official, who asked not to be identified, there was "extended discussion of Taiwan" during the summit. Biden also raised "concerns" over wider issues of human rights abuses and mass repression against the Uyghurs in the northwest region of Xinjiang. The two leaders have spoken by phone twice since Biden's inauguration in January but with Xi refusing to travel

abroad because of the pandemic, an online video meeting was the only option short of an in-person summit.

Avoid veering into conflict

The White House emphasized it did not expect - or get - any concrete changes out of the summit. Rather the goal was to build on earlier contacts with Xi to manage a relationship that is too big to fail. Speaking from the White House to Xi on a television screen, Biden said it was their "responsibility as leaders of China and the United States to ensure that the competition between our countries does not veer into conflict, whether intended or unintended."



Tensions over Taiwan loom

"We need to establish some common sense guardrails," he said. Instead, the aim should be for "simple, straightforward competition," Biden said, promising a "candid" discussion. Xi, speaking from Beijing, called Biden "my old friend," but said their countries had to work more closely.

"We face multiple challenges together. As the world's two largest economies and permanent members of the UN Security Council, China and the United States need to increase communication and cooperation," he said, speaking through an interpreter in brief public remarks, before they went behind closed doors. Both Biden and Xi emphasized the need for working together on major global issues, especially COVID-19

and climate change. "A sound and steady China-US relationship" is needed "for safeguarding a peaceful and stable international environment," Xi said.

Biden gets domestic boost

Relations between the superpowers plummeted during the presidency of Donald Trump, who launched a trade war with China while assailing Beijing's response to an international probe into the origins of the Covid pandemic in the Chinese city of Wuhan. Biden has recast the confrontation more broadly as a struggle between democracy and autocracy. He got a boost Monday when he signed into law a \$1.2 trillion infrastructure package, the biggest of its kind in more than half a century.

Biden describes the initiative as an important step in catching up with years of intensive Chinese government investments, thereby proving that democracies can compete. "The world is changing," he said in a White House speech. "We have to be ready." While the day-to-day tone is less erratic than in the Trump era, tension over Taiwan in particular is threatening to escalate into dangerous new territory. China has ramped up military activities near Taiwan in recent years, with a record number of warplanes intruding into the island's air defense zone in October.

The United States says it supports Taiwan's self-defense but is ambiguous about whether it would intervene to help directly. In the brief comments made in front of reporters, Xi referred to each country needing to "run our domestic affairs" but did not mention US criticism of Beijing's saber-rattling around Taiwan, mass human rights violations or other sore points. China's foreign ministry on Monday put the onus on Biden to improve relations. "We hope that the US will work in the same direction as China to get along with each other," foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian told reporters.— AFP

BioNTech, Moderna, Pfizer making \$1,000 profit every second

WASHINGTON: Pfizer, BioNTech and Moderna are making combined profits of \$65,000 every minute from their highly successful COVID-19 vaccines while the world's poorest countries remain largely unvaccinated, according to a new analysis. The companies have sold the vast majority of their doses to rich countries, leaving low-income nations in the lurch, said the People's Vaccine Alliance (PVA), a coalition campaigning for wider access to Covid vaccines, which based its calculations on the firms' own earnings reports.

The Alliance estimates that the trio will make pre-tax profits of \$34 billion this year between them, which works out to over \$1,000 a second, \$65,000 a minute or \$93.5 million a day. "It is obscene that just a few companies are making millions of dollars in profit every single hour, while just two percent of people in low-income countries have been fully vaccinated against coronavirus," Maaza Seyoum of the African Alliance and People's Vaccine Alliance Africa said.

"Pfizer, BioNTech and Moderna have used their monopolies to prioritize the most profitable contracts



KATHMANDU: A health worker shows a vial of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine against the COVID-19 coronavirus in Kathmandu after the government began a drive to vaccinate people above the age of 12 years and those with chronic health diseases. — AFP

with the richest governments, leaving low-income countries out in the cold." Pfizer and BioNTech have delivered less than one percent of their total supplies to low-income countries while Moderna has delivered just 0.2 percent, the PVA said. Currently, 98 percent of people in low-income countries have not been fully vaccinated.

The three companies' actions are in contrast to

AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson, which provided their vaccines on a not-for-profit basis, though both have announced they foresee ending this arrangement in future as the pandemic winds down. PVA said that despite receiving public funding of more than \$8 billion, Pfizer, BioNTech and Moderna have refused calls to transfer vaccine technology to producers in low- and middle-income countries via the World Health Organization, "a move that could increase global supply, drive down prices and save millions of lives."

"In Moderna's case, this is despite explicit pressure from the White House and requests from the WHO that the company collaborate in and help accelerate its plan to replicate the Moderna vaccine for wider production at its mRNA hub in South Africa," the group said. While Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla has dismissed technology transfer as "dangerous nonsense," the WHO's decision to grant emergency use approval to the Indian-developed Covaxin earlier this month proves that developing countries have the capacity and expertise, PVA added.

PVA, whose 80 members include the African Alliance, Global Justice Now, Oxfam, and UNAIDS, is calling for pharmaceutical corporations to immediately suspend intellectual property rights for COVID vaccines by agreeing to a proposed waiver of World Trade Organization's TRIPS agreement. More than 100 nations, including the United States, back that move, but it is being blocked by rich countries including the UK and Germany.— AFP

Number of smokers worldwide shrinking

GENEVA: The number of smokers worldwide has dropped steadily in recent years, the World Health Organization said yesterday, urging countries to step up control measures further to kick deadly tobacco addiction. In 2020, some 1.30 billion people were using tobacco globally, down from 1.32 billion two years earlier, the WHO said in a fresh report. And that number, it said, is expected to dwindle to 1.27 billion by 2025, indicating a decrease of some 50 million tobacco users over a seven-year-period, even as the global population has swelled.

The report showed that while nearly a third of the global population over the age of 15 used tobacco products back in 2000, only around a fifth is expected to be doing so by 2025. "It is very encouraging to see fewer people using tobacco each year," WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said in a statement. But "we still have a long way to go, and tobacco companies will continue to use every trick in the book to defend the gigantic profits they make from peddling their deadly wares."

Over 8 million deaths

Tobacco use is estimated to kill more than eight million people each year, most of them directly due to their own tobacco use, while 1.2 million of them are non-smokers exposed to second-hand smoke, according to WHO numbers. Yesterday's report cautioned that the annual numbers of deaths would continue climbing for some time even as tobacco use declines "because tobacco kills its users and people exposed to its emissions slowly." The report hailed that 60 countries were now on track to reduce tobacco use by 30 percent between 2010 and 2025.

When WHO published its last report on global tobacco trends two years ago, only 32 countries were on track to do so. "We are seeing great progress in many countries" but "this success is fragile," said Ruediger Krech, head of the WHO's health promotion department. The report called on countries to scale up their use of recognized measures to reduce tobacco use, including enforcing advertising bans, plastering health warnings on cigarette packages, raising tobacco taxes and providing assistance to those who want to quit.

The WHO calculated that investing just \$1.68 per capita each year in cessation interventions like providing advice via text message could help 152 million tobacco users successfully quit by 2030. While the numbers are coming down, the report, which did not include electronic cigarette use, highlighted that 36.7 percent of all men and 7.8 percent of the world's women were still using tobacco products last year.—AFP