

International

US throws support behind treaty to curb plastic

NAIROBI: The United States yesterday threw its support behind negotiations on a treaty to curb plastic pollution, ending a key holdup in international efforts to clean up the planet's oceans and save marine life. On a visit to the United Nations Environment Programme in Nairobi, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the United States would back talks in the Kenyan capital in February on a treaty to address plastic.

"Our goal is to create a tool that we can use to protect our oceans and all the life that they sustain from growing global harms of plastic pollution," Blinken said. "As we know, our health—our survival—is bound up in the health of our oceans. We have to do more to protect them," he said.

About eight million tonnes of plastic end up in the oceans each year, killing or injuring one million birds and more than 100,000 marine mammals, according to UN figures. Blinken's statement is the latest US effort to ramp up environmental protection under President Joe Biden, who has made the fight against climate change a key domestic priority. Likely mindful of political realities in divided Washington, where treaties need ratification by the Senate, Blinken called for a plastic treaty in which countries would come up with their own plans of action.

The United States has seen bipartisan calls to clean up oceans with former president Donald Trump signing an act aimed at curbing plastic pollution in the oceans. But environmentalists say that the previous administration stymied international efforts by opposing a treaty and blaming the problem squarely on China—a major source of plastic processing but of material often coming from the West.

An investigation last year by environmentalist campaigners Greenpeace said that industry groups were lobbying the Trump administration to press Kenya in trade negotiations to reverse its rules and take in plastic trash. The idea appears dead, with the Biden administration not pursuing trade talks.

Blinken, who is promoting climate action on a three-nation trip to Africa, praised Kenya as an en-

vironmental leader including for its ban on single-use plastic bags. The United States is one of the only nations not party to the Basel Convention, a UN treaty reached in 1989 that regulates the movement of hazardous waste.

Plastic pollution has soared over the past half century with the advent of cheap, single-use bags and other "disposable" plastic that can stay in the environment for thousands of years. In the Pacific, an accumulation dubbed the Great Pacific Plastic Patch is around three times the size of France.

A growing number of nations have moved to curb plastic pollution but environmental experts say that a binding, international approach is vital to coordinating efforts. A study last year backed by the Pew Charitable Trusts said that plastic pollution

in the oceans can be decreased by 80 percent in 20 years using existing technologies if there is ambitious and concerted action.

Blinken's support for the plastic effort comes on the heels of the COP 26 summit in Glasgow where the United States and China said they would work together on climate, a rare example of cooperation amid tense relations between the world's two largest economic powers.

In Nairobi, Blinken pressed China to join another climate initiative—an alliance led by the United States and the European Union to cut back on methane. Methane, emitted by oil and gas production and agriculture, spends less time in the atmosphere than carbon dioxide but is far more potent and is seen as a key area where the world can take action.—AFP



NAIROBI: A trash barrel with a painting of plastic trash in the ocean is displayed as US Secretary of State Antony Blinken attends an oceans plastics event at the United Nations Environment Programme headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya, yesterday. — AFP

The EU-Belarus migrant crisis

MOSCOW: The European Union and Belarus are locked in a stand-off over migrants that has come against a backdrop of tensions between the West and Minsk's backer Moscow. Here is what you need to know about the crisis that has seen thousands of migrants trapped in dire conditions on the Belarus-Poland border.

Crisis setting in

Since the summer, thousands of migrants, mostly from the Middle East, have flocked to Belarus to try to enter Europe through neighbouring EU member states Poland, Latvia or Lithuania. The West accuses Minsk of having lured the migrants with the promise of an easy crossing into the EU and then forcing them to stay at the border as retaliation for sanctions im-

posed over the regime's suppression of dissent in the ex-Soviet country.

Anxious not to repeat the migration crisis of 2015, the EU has backed Poland, Latvia and Lithuania, who have barricaded their borders despite the deaths of nearly a dozen migrants. On Tuesday, Warsaw forces fired tear gas and water cannon in freezing temperatures on a crowd of hundreds of people who advanced on a border post after a week of living in a makeshift camp.

Polish Defense Minister Mariusz Blaszczak warned on Wednesday that the crisis could last "for months or even years". Around 4,000 people are believed to be currently stranded along the Polish border, where the majority of the migrants are concentrated. In a sign that the crisis is becoming entrenched, the Belarusian authorities put up some 1,000 migrants in a "logistical centre" this week - a move that could make the camp a semi-permanent presence on the borders of the EU.

What the sides are saying

The EU accuses Belarusian President Alexan-

der Lukashenko of engineering the crisis to force the Europeans to restart dialogue, which the West cut off after his regime launched a crackdown on the opposition in the wake of a presidential election last year. The strongman who has ruled Belarus with an iron fist for nearly three decades denies the claims. This week he spoke twice by telephone with German Chancellor Angela Merkel in his first call with a Western leader since last year.

On Wednesday, his office said that direct talks between Belarus and the EU are imminent. Germany, however, has not confirmed direct talks. Berlin instead outlined a process of providing humanitarian aid and returning migrants involving the United Nations refugee agency UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration in cooperation with the European Commission. Still, Merkel's spokesman Steffen Seibert said Wednesday that it is "useful" to speak with Minsk "to improve this humanitarian situation" even if the talks are with a leader whose legitimacy Europe and Germany do not recognize.—AFP

Death toll from Burkina Faso attack rises to 53

OUAGADOUGOU, Burkina Faso: The death toll from a weekend attack by suspected jihadists on a gendarmerie in northern Burkina Faso has risen to 53, the government said Wednesday. The attack was one of the deadliest to hit the West African country's defence and security forces since jihadist violence erupted six years ago.

Gunmen travelling on pick-up trucks and motorcycles attacked the Inata gendarmerie near the Malian border before dawn on Sunday, leading to drawn-out clashes, a security source on the same day said.

On Monday the death toll was reported as 32. But government spokesman Ouseni Tamboura said Wednesday that a total of 53 people were killed, 49 gendarmes and four civilians. "Fortunately, we have found 46 gendarmes" alive, he said after a cabinet meeting.

However local sources said that around 150 gendarmes were stationed at the facility in Inata, meaning the toll could yet rise further. Hundreds of people protested in several cities across the country on Tuesday to demand resignations over the "inability to stop the terrorist attacks".

President Roch Marc Christian Kabore on Wednesday criticised "substantial dysfunction" within the army, including in food provision. "It's unacceptable, and that's why I really do understand the... angry reactions," he said as he left the cabinet meeting.

Tamboura said earlier that the head of the armed forces in the north of the country had been removed from his post following Sunday's attack. The country has been declared in mourning from Tuesday until Thursday.

Burkina Faso has been hit by jihadist attacks since 2015, mostly in the northern and eastern regions close to Mali and Niger-countries facing their own struggles against jihadists. Jihadist attacks in Burkina Faso, often coupled with ambushes and attributed to movements affiliated to the Islamic State group and Al-Qaeda, have killed more than 2,000 people and forced more than 1.4 million to flee their homes. - AFP "He is disappointed that the police and prosecutors are not able to understand the facts," he told news agency TT. Lundin Energy spokesman Robert Eriksson meanwhile told AFP "the investigation is both unfounded and fundamentally flawed." "We know that Lundin did nothing wrong. There is no evidence linking any representatives of Lundin to the alleged primary crimes in this case." — AFP