

International

Blinken promises US' shift from military focus in Latin America

Biden seeks to champion stable democracies

QUITO: The United States has focused too much on security over other assistance in Latin America, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said yesterday, as he vowed a concerted push to encourage democracy. Amid a rise both of authoritarians and populists in Latin America, Blinken is visiting Ecuador and Colombia as President Joe Biden seeks to champion stable democracies.

Both nations receive US security training and are led by conservatives who have taken controversial measures, with Colombian forces this year killing dozens of anti-government protesters and Ecuador on Tuesday announcing a state of emergency just as Blinken visited. "Our record on improving civilian security in the region's democracies has been mixed," Blinken was to say in a speech Wednesday in the Ecuadorian capital Quito, according to advance excerpts.

"That's because too often, we tried to fix this problem by relying too much on training and equipping security forces, and too little on other tools in our kit," he was to say. "And we focused too much on addressing the symptoms of organized crime, like homicides and drug trafficking, and too little on the root causes. We're working to correct that imbalance."

Among US initiatives that go beyond security, Blinken pointed to the Biden administration's greater push on fighting corruption, including denying visas to officials involved in graft.

Blinken said the United States, alongside its frequent calls for elections, would also be more attentive to economic concerns such as improving labor standards, health care and education. "This should be obvious, but the reality

“We’re working to correct that imbalance”

is that we've often put more energy into strengthening civil and political rights - such as free and fair elections, the rule of law, freedom of speech and assembly - than we have into strengthening people's economic and social rights."

Challenge from China
The Biden administration, largely fol-

lowing the lead of former president Donald Trump, has ramped up pressure on leftist autocratic leaders in Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela, where President Nicolas Maduro has suspended dialogue with the US-backed opposition. While US statements have been more cautious, questions about democracy have also been rising in the region's most populous nation, Brazil, where far-right President Jair Bolsonaro has taken a page from Trump in sowing doubts about the legitimacy of upcoming elections.

"We find ourselves in a moment of democratic reckoning," Blinken was to say. While democracy in recent decades has brought "unprecedented prosperity" to Latin America, he was to say that the future depended on whether elected leaders can "deliver on the issues that matter most to people."

His call for an economic focus comes as China lavishes loan money for infrastructure in Latin America, worrying the United States which sees a rising and authoritarian Beijing as the biggest long-term challenge.

In Ecuador, which has received billions of dollars in Chinese loans to fund electricity, oil and other projects, Blinken



QUITO: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken gives his thumb up during a visit to the Camari market centre, where local artisans and farmers exhibit their products, in Quito. —AFP

said he was not asking countries to "choose between the United States and China" but called for greater scrutiny about Beijing's investments in sensitive areas. While far smaller in financial scope

than China's loans, the United States recently sought to make a tangible impact by announcing \$150 million in loans for small businesses run by women in Ecuador. —AFP

News in brief

50 killed after vehicle falls

LUBUMBASHI: At least 50 people were killed when the vehicle they were in plunged into a river in southeastern DR Congo, a local source said on Tuesday. "A truck fell into the Kaluma-Ngongo with more than 50 passengers on board" on Sunday, said Harce Kayumba, spokesman for the Haut-Katanga regional government. Divers launched a search and rescued two survivors who are being treated in hospital. The search continues for the other passengers, Kayumba added, without giving any further details of the accident. In neighboring Lualaba province, the derailment of a goods train "caused the death of nine people and left 36 injured, 11 seriously," provincial interior minister Adeoda Kapenda told AFP. Road accidents are frequent in the Democratic Republic of Congo, often caused by ignoring traffic rules, with old vehicles not subjected to technical inspections. — AFP

Ukraine COVID deaths soar

KIEV: Ukraine yesterday reported record coronavirus vaccination numbers as the country re-imposed restrictions amid a surge in infections and deaths. According to a government tally, 226,587 people were vaccinated over the past 24 hours - the highest figure since the beginning of the ex-Soviet country's vaccination drive in February. A flurry of pictures on social media showed long queues of people in vaccination centers in cities across the country in recent days. The rush came after restrictions came into force on Monday in several regions in the east and south of the country worst hit by surging coronavirus cases. "It is only with mass vaccination and compliance with quarantine that we can avoid a further increase of infections," Health Minister Viktor Lyashko said in a statement. — AFP

Pointing gun at journalists?

PARIS: French far-right presidential hopeful Eric Zemmour pointed a sniper's rifle at journalists at an arms fair yesterday, a stunt that reinforced his anti-media populist credentials but that drew condemnation from opponents. Zemmour, who has emerged as a front-runner for presidential elections next year, turned the weapon on reporters at the Milipol arms fair in Paris, telling them with a smile: "It's serious now, eh? Get back, move." Zemmour, a former journalist who is an admirer of ex-US president Donald Trump, is yet to declare his candidacy for the polls next April, but is positioning himself as an anti-elite, anti-immigration champion. — AFP

Nigeria army kills 50 'bandits'

LAGOS: Nigerian helicopter gunships have killed more than 50 "bandits" during an operation in the restive northwest, regional authorities said on Tuesday. Heavily armed gangs known locally as bandits have terrorized northwest and central Nigeria for years, raiding and looting villages, but the attacks have become even more violent in recent months. "In an inspiring success for the security forces, over 50 bandits have been neutralized during a combined ground and air assault" in the Birnin Gwari district of Kaduna state, regional security official Samuel Aruwan said in a statement. The armed bandits, on motorcycles, were spotted "waiting to ambush the ground forces", said Gwari. — AFP

Google debuts new Pixel, latest try in smartphone fight

SAN FRANCISCO: Google launched new Pixel 6 smartphones on Tuesday, its latest attempt to field a champion in a sector the tech giant has dismally failed thus far to conquer. Smartphone sales are dominated by Apple and South Korean electronics colossus Samsung, but Google is aiming to expand its single-digit market share with the newest Android-powered Pixel line.

Google touted the phones as completely "reimagined" during a presentation in which it pointed to security, speed, style and sophisticated software capabilities. "This year is quite a bit different," said Google devices senior vice president Rick Osterloh. Pixel phones have been seen as a way for Google to showcase the capabilities of its free Android mobile operating system, but its share of the global smartphone market has been meager.

Analyst Brad Akyuz explained "Pixel's mediocre penetration performance" by citing handset glitches in past models and US mobile service providers subsidizing other brands in offers to customers. "The one area where the Pixel has excelled at is software, but it has not been enough to differentiate much," he added. The new handsets take a page from Apple's playbook with sophisticated hardware and a custom chip that tap into the internet giant's other offerings.

Samsung uses Google-backed Android software to power phones, offering handsets at a wide variety of prices. Apple has consistently aimed iPhones at the high-end of the market, controlling the hardware and software so tightly it has raised antitrust concerns. "We have state-of-the-art hardware, which means Pixel can deliver even more impressive real-world performance, as well as new



The new Google smartphone, Pixel 6, is displayed. Google on October 19, 2021 debuted its flagship Pixel 6 smartphones, the latest effort in a market the tech giant has failed to conquer. — AFP

AI-driven experiences that have never been possible before," said Osterloh.

Pixel 6 models, with superfast 5G wireless capability, debut Google's own Tensor chip crafted to enable computers to think more like people do. The Pixel 6 hardware and software mix ramps up the smartphone's

ability to understand what has been called another step toward a future of "ambient computing," according to Osterloh. The phrase refers to being able to access the internet or computing power conversationally at any time as portrayed in the 2013 science fiction romance film "Her." — AFP

UK health leaders urge COVID curbs as infections rise

LONDON: Healthcare leaders urged the British government yesterday to reinstate some coronavirus restrictions to ease pressures on hospitals because of spiraling case numbers. But ministers remain opposed to reintroducing any curbs, arguing the situation is still far better than earlier this year and the country is learning to "live with the virus". A total of 223 deaths from Covid-19 were registered on Tuesday - the highest 24-hour toll since March - while there is mounting concern at daily case rates.

The country is averaging more than 40,000 new cases a day for the first time since the summer, and the number of patients admitted to hospital is increasing. Matthew Taylor, head of the NHS Confederation representing the state-run health service in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, said hospitals were feeling severe pressure and action was needed as the busier winter period approaches. "We've got a very particular problem over this winter, and we need to act," he told Sky News.

Taylor said health leaders report the worsening Covid-19 situation means they are missing key targets in areas such as waits in emergency departments, ambulance response times and treatment backlogs. "Is it better to act early and take meas-



LONDON: Commuters, some wearing face coverings to help prevent the spread of coronavirus, walk out of a Transport for London (TfL) underground train in London yesterday. — AFP

ures which don't stop the economy working - but I recognize they are inconvenient for people - or do we wait for things to get worse and possibly risk having to take more severe measures?" he added.

'Policy is working'

The government, which lifted coronavirus restrictions in July, insists it is closely watching the statistics, which have been attributed to high numbers of infections in school-age children. But it maintains the situation does not yet warrant a return to restric-

tions, such as compulsory indoor mask-wearing and working from home where possible.

"I don't see any cause for changing the course at this minute," Business Secretary Kwasi Kwarteng told the BBC. "This is a virus that we are learning to live with. "Clearly any increase is concerning and we're monitoring the data on a daily basis. "But for now, we think that this policy is working," he added, referring to the government's vaccination campaign and latest offer of booster jabs to the more vulnerable. — AFP

Growing in numbers and power, criminal gangs terrorize Haiti

PORT-AU-PRINCE: Last week's kidnapping in broad daylight of 17 US and Canadian missionaries and their families in the Haitian capital highlighted criminal gangs' growing hold on the country, fueled by a deep political crisis and the powerlessness of the judicial system. Cases of kidnappings have more than doubled over the past year as gangs have grown increasingly numerous and powerful, leaving an already weak police force unable to cope.

In the most recent kidnapping on Saturday outside Port-au-Prince, members of the brazen 400 Mawozo gang are demanding \$17 million for the

release of the missionaries and their families, according to Haitian officials. More than 600 cases of kidnappings for ransom were recorded in the first three quarters of 2021, compared to 231 during the same period last year, according to the Center for Analysis and Research in Human Rights, a Haitian civil society group.

Gangs have increased their hold on the country in recent years. More than 150 criminal groups, some of them previously dormant, were identified in the Caribbean country in 2019, according to Marie-Yolène Gilles of the Je Klere Foundation, a human rights group. Today, they are too numerous to be counted, said Gilles, adding that "in each neighborhood, an armed man is there to be the leader." With no investigations conducted to trace the recipients of ransom payments, Haiti finds itself locked a vicious cycle where payoffs only help gangs thrive. Half-a million dollars here, a million dollars there, Gilles says. "That's money! Where is it hidden?"

'War arsenal'

Officially, 16,000 police officers watch over Haiti's 11 million inhabitants. But in reality, the police force is much smaller. Some agents are dispatched to guard public and private figures, while others have simply given up their posts and left to seek a better future abroad. The police force is severely under-equipped and unprepared to take on the gangs that possess a veritable "war arsenal" that they are happy to showcase in videos on social media, said Marie-Rosy Auguste Ducena, from the National Human Rights Defense Network.

This creates a "climate of terror" among the population, but also makes it clear to the police that "each time they have to confront them, they risk dying," added Ducena. According to the Center for Analysis and Research of Human Rights, 37 police officers have died on duty so far this year, compared to 28 killed last year. — AFP