

International

US seeks to contain Beijing anger after Biden vows Taiwan defense

Biden vows to defend the island from attack by Beijing

WASHINGTON: The United States on Friday sought to prevent an escalation with China, saying there was no change in Taiwan policy after President Joe Biden promised to defend the island from attack by Beijing. Tensions have soared in recent months as Beijing steps up air incursions near Taiwan, a self-ruling democracy that the growing Asian power has vowed one day to take over, by force if necessary.

At a CNN televised forum in Baltimore on Thursday evening, Biden was asked whether the United States would come to Taiwan's defense if China invaded. "Yes," he responded. "We have a commitment to that." Biden's statement appeared at odds with the long-held US policy of "strategic ambiguity," where Washington helps build Taiwan's defenses but does not explicitly promise to come to the island's help in the event of war.

Price said. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, on a visit to NATO headquarters in Brussels, declined to discuss "hypotheticals" but said the United States "will continue to help Taiwan with the sorts of capabilities that it needs to defend itself."

New firmness?

Beijing said that Biden's comments risked "damaging Sino-US relations," warning Washington on Friday to "act and speak cautiously on the Taiwan issue." "China has no room for compromise on issues involving its core interests," foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said at a press briefing. The US should not underestimate China's "staunch determination, firm will and strong ability" to defend against what it sees as threats to its sovereignty, Wang added.

Price declined to reply to Wang's remarks, saying, "We have been nothing but clear when it comes to where we stand." Strategic ambiguity is designed to deter a Chinese invasion but also discourage Taiwan from formally declaring independence—something Beijing regards as a red line.

Biden's comments were welcomed by Taiwan, which has pushed to bolster international alliances to protect itself from Beijing. "The US government has demonstrated, through actual actions, their rock solid support for Taiwan," Presidential Office spokesman Xavier Chang said in a statement. Biden made similar remarks in August during an interview with ABC, insisting that the US would always defend key allies, naming Taiwan among them, despite the withdrawal from Afghanistan in the face of the victorious Taliban.

Biden's remarks were unlikely to come out of ignorance. The veteran politician himself was serving on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1979 and voted to approve the Taiwan Relations Act. Richard McGregor, a senior fellow for East Asia at the Lowy Institute, said

formance as reason to dissolve the government," said Jonas Horner of the International Crisis Group. Even ministers within Hamdok's cabinet have expressed support for rival camps. On Thursday, Industry Minister Ibrahim al-Sheikh joined in Thursday's mass rallies backing civilian rule.

On Friday, Finance Minister Gibril Ibrahim - an ex-rebel leader from Darfur, who joined the government after a landmark 2020 peace deal - took part in Friday prayers at the pro-military sit-in. Volker Perthes, UN Special Representative to Sudan, stressed "the need to maintain the constitutional partnership between the military and civilian component" after meeting Thursday with the leader of Sudan's ruling Sovereign Council, military chief General Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan. Perthes urged for a "return to dialogue and (to) build on achievements of the transitional period."

'Keep the military at bay'

Tensions between the two sides have long simmered, but divisions ratcheted up after a failed coup on September 21. Popular support for the government led by Hamdok, who was picked in 2019 by a once-unioned FFC, has also waned over a tough raft of economic reforms that took a toll on ordinary Sudanese.

Delays in delivering justice to the families of those killed under Bashir, and even during the 2019 protests following his ouster, have left Hamdok vulnerable to criticism. And since mid-September, the government has been criticized for its handling of anti-government protests in the east - resulting in a blockade of the country's key maritime trade hub of Port Sudan, triggering shortages nationwide. "Hamdok and the FFC have failed to meet people's expectations," said Mirghani. "Thursday's protests were not particularly backing them, as much as simply asserting revolutionary goals."

The security forces - including the regular Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the much-feared paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) - have maintained a powerful hold, and are heavily involved in everything from outlining foreign policy to running lucrative companies. "The military - both SAF and RSF - are newly determined not to relinquish their political and economic power," said Horner, but added that the main protests can still be a counterweight to their strength. "Popular opposition has, and can continue, to keep the military at bay," Horner said. —AFP



Tensions soar as Beijing steps up air incursions

The United States clarified Friday that it was still guided by the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, in which Congress required the United States to provide weaponry to "enable Taiwan to maintain sufficient self-defense capabilities." "The president was not announcing any change in our policy and there is no change in our policy," State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters, reiterating earlier White House comment.

"We will uphold our commitments under the act, we will continue to support Taiwan's self-defense and will continue to oppose any unilateral changes to the status

Sudan mass protests back civilian rule but army remains strong

KHARTOUM: Mass protests in Sudan show strong support for a civilian-led democracy, but analysts warn street demonstrations may have little impact on powerful factions pushing a return to military rule. Under a 2019 power-sharing deal after the ouster of long-time dictator Omar al-Bashir, Sudan is ruled by a sovereign council of civilian and military representatives tasked with overseeing a transition to a full civilian government. But cracks in the leadership are growing wider.

On Thursday, tens of thousands of Sudanese marched in several cities to back the full transfer of power to civilians, and to counter a rival days-long sit-in outside the presidential palace in the capital Khartoum demanding a return to "military rule". The two sides represent opposing factions of the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC), the civilian umbrella group which spearheaded demonstrations that led to the army's overthrow and jailing of Bashir. "The protests were an explicit rejection of the prospect of a military rule, and an emphasis that the transition to civilian rule remains the goal," Sudanese analyst Othman Mirghani told AFP. But, "despite their size, they have little impact on the political reality at play," he added.

'Divisions'

Critics have charged that the rival sit-in has been orchestrated by senior figures in the security forces, Bashir sympathizers and other "counter-revolutionaries". But it has drawn support from some of those hit hard by tough International Monetary Fund-backed economic reforms implemented by Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, a former UN economist. Sudan's precarious transition has been marred by political splits and power struggles among factions at the helm of the transition.

"The FFC's own divisions, that detract from their ability to govern, are making it easy for the military and the FFC breakaway group to point to poor per-



KHARTOUM: Sudanese pro-military protesters listen to prayers sermon, with the attendance of the Minister of Finance, in front of the presidential palace in the capital Khartoum. — AFP

7 killed in Bangladesh Rohingya camp attack

BALUKHALI: Gunmen killed seven people and wounded at least 20 Friday in a Rohingya refugee camp in Bangladesh, police and a medic said, an attack that heightens tensions after the recent shooting of a prominent community leader. The attackers shot and stabbed people attending an Islamic school in the camp, a regional police chief said.

Four people died instantly. Three others died at a hospital in one of the camps in the Balukhali refugee complex, part of a bigger network of squalid settlements housing 900,000 people. Police did not say how many were wounded but a medic with Doctors Without Borders (MSF) who requested anonymity said about 20 people were badly hurt. "About 20 seriously injured people came to our hospital, many with no arms, no legs or no eyes. Their condition is very bad," the doctor said.

Police official Kamran Hossain said "Rohingya miscreants" entered the Darul Ulum Nadwatul Ulama al-Islamia madrasa before dawn and "randomly hacked and shot people inside". Security forces immediately sealed off the camp, which houses more than 27,000 people. Camp residents shared images on social media of bodies on the floor of the madrasa. The images



IN THE AIR: This file handout picture taken and released by Taiwan's Defense Ministry shows a Taiwan F-16 fighter (left) jet monitoring one of two Chinese H-6 bombers that flew over the Bashi Channel south of Taiwan and the Miyako Strait, near Japan's Okinawa Island. — AFP

Biden may have wanted to show greater firmness. "I suspect Biden was not trying to announce any change. So it was either loose language, or perhaps a slightly harder tone, deliberately adopted because of the way Beijing has increased the tempo of its military harassment of Taiwan recently," he said.

Warplane incursions

China has ramped up economic, diplomatic and military pressure on Taiwan since the 2016 election of President Tsai Ing-wen, who views Taiwan as already sovereign and not part of "one China." Military pressure has escalated in the last year with China sending waves of fighter jets and nuclear-capable bombers into Taiwan's air defense zone. According to an AFP tally, more than 800 flights

have been made into the zone since September last year - 170 just this month. Defending Taiwan, one of Asia's most progressive democracies, has become a rare bipartisan issue in Washington's otherwise deeply polarized landscape.

At Thursday's live town hall, Biden was also asked by an audience member whether the United States would be able to keep up with China's rapid military development. Biden responded with "Yes." "Don't worry about whether... they're going to be more powerful," he said. "China, Russia and the rest of the world knows we have the most powerful military in the history of the world." Biden's comments come in the wake of a Financial Times report that China has tested a state-of-the-art hypersonic missile with nuclear capacity that flew around the planet before landing, albeit not on target. — AFP

UN fears 'mass atrocity crimes' in Myanmar as troops gather in north

UNITED NATIONS: The UN said Friday it feared an even greater human rights catastrophe in Myanmar amid reports of thousands of troops massing in the north of the Southeast Asian country, which has been in chaos since a February coup. "We should all be prepared, as the people in this part of Myanmar are prepared, for even more mass atrocity crimes. I desperately hope that I am wrong," said UN Special Rapporteur on Myanmar Tom Andrews. More than 1,100 civilians have been killed in the country's bloody crackdown on dissent and more than 8,000 arrested since the coup, according to a local monitoring group.

Andrews, who was presenting the findings of an annual human rights report on Myanmar to the General Assembly, said that he had received information that tens of thousands of troops and heavy weapons were being moved into restive regions in the north and northwest. The findings, he said, also indicated that the junta had engaged in probable crimes against humanity and war crimes. "These tactics are ominously reminiscent of those employed by the military before its genocidal attacks against the Rohingya in Rakhine State in 2016 and 2017," Andrews said.

About 740,000 Rohingya fled Myanmar's Rakhine state in 2017 after security forces launched a clampdown that the UN has said may amount to genocide. Andrews urged countries to deny Myanmar's military junta the money, weapons and legitimacy it desired, citing a prisoner release earlier in the week as evidence that pressure was working. On Monday, Myanmar's junta chief Min Aung Hlaing announced the release of more than 5,000 people jailed for protesting against the coup.

Haiti gang threatens to execute hostages

PORT-AU-PRINCE: The leader of a Haitian gang who kidnapped a group of North Americans over the weekend has threatened to execute them, according to video seen by AFP. The footage shot Wednesday but released Thursday on social media showed Wilson Joseph, wearing a suit and surrounded by armed men, in front of coffins containing the bodies of five members of his gang.

"Since I'm not getting what I need, I'll kill these Americans," Joseph said, speaking in Haitian Creole. A senior US official speaking on condition of anonymity said the video appeared to be genuine. "As far as I know, the video that appeared online today is legitimate," the official told reporters late Thursday. "It's not a fake video as far as we can tell right now."

"We are in contact with the Christian Aid Missionaries. We are in contact constantly with Haitian National Police. The FBI is on the ground in Haiti and in contact with all the parties involved," the official added. The kidnappers are demanding \$17 million ransom for the hostages' freedom, security sources have

could not be independently verified. "We arrested one attacker immediately after the incident," local police chief Shihab Kaiser Khan told reporters. The man was found with a gun, six rounds of ammunition and a knife, he added.

Refugees fear violence

Many Rohingya activists have gone into hiding or sought protection from the police and UN agencies since the killing of community representative Mohib Ullah in the nearby Balukhali camp on September 29. The 48-year-old teacher had become a leading voice for the stateless community. He met then US president Donald Trump at the White House in 2019. Some activists blamed the killing on the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), though the armed group



YANGON: Police patrol in a truck in downtown Yangon. — AFP

The move came just days after the Association of Southeast Asian Nations delivered a major snub to the military regime, exclude the junta head from an upcoming summit of the 10-country bloc. "ASEAN's announcement that the junta will not be welcome at its upcoming summit strikes at the heart," Andrews said. Andrews said that junta-controlled forces had displaced a quarter million people. Many of those who had been detained were tortured, he said, including dozens who had died as a result. Andrews added that he had received credible reports that children had also been tortured. — AFP

told AFP. On Saturday the group of 17 US and Canadian missionaries and their children were kidnapped in broad daylight while on a visit to an orphanage in the heart of an area in eastern Port-au-Prince, which is under control of the gang.

The Ohio-based Christian Aid Ministries, to which the abducted missionaries belong, said the group included 12 adults aged 18-48, along with five children aged eight months, three, six, 13 and 15. The United States has advised Americans not to travel to Haiti, in particular due to kidnappings they say regularly include American citizens. Since December 2020, Haitian police have sought Joseph for crimes including assassination, kidnapping, vehicle theft and hijacking of cargo trucks.

Meanwhile on Thursday motor taxi drivers blocked roads and snared traffic in the Haitian capital to protest against fuel shortages caused by gangs controlling oil access. Across the city, demonstrators have voiced outrage over being forced to buy gasoline on the black market. Gangs' tightening grip on Port-au-Prince since June has prevented secure access to two of Haiti's three oil terminals. Armed groups hijacked more than a dozen tankers at the third, located in the Cite Soleil slum, in early September. On Thursday, near one barricade of flaming tires, protestors accused authorities of favoring fuel imports over renewable energy. — AFP

denied involvement. ARSA is the militant group accused of being behind attacks on Myanmar security forces in 2017 that set off a military clampdown and a mass exodus into Bangladesh by 740,000 Rohingya. It is also involved in drug smuggling and other illegal activities and is trying to increase its control in the Bangladesh camps.

A prominent Rohingya expatriate who knew the madrasa teachers blamed ARSA for the shooting, saying the school had refused to pay the group. "Since last year ARSA has ordered all madrasas to pay them 10,000 taka (\$120) a month and every teacher 500 taka a month. But the madrasa which was attacked today refused," he said, speaking on condition of anonymity as he fears his relatives in the camps could be targeted. — AFP