

International

Taiwan has no right to join United Nations, China says

In latest Taiwan move, US urges more UN inclusion

BEIJING: China insisted yesterday that Taiwan had no right to join the United Nations, after the United States ratcheted up tensions with a call for the democratic island to have greater involvement in the world body. In a statement marking 50 years since the UN General Assembly voted to seat Beijing and boot out Taipei, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Tuesday he regretted that Taiwan had been increasingly excluded on the world stage.



Taiwan thanks US for support

"As the international community faces an unprecedented number of complex and global issues, it is critical for all stakeholders to help address these problems. This includes the 24 million people who live in Taiwan," Blinken said. "Taiwan's meaningful participation in the UN system is not a political issue, but a pragmatic one," he said. "That is why we encourage all UN member states to join us in supporting Taiwan's robust, meaningful participation throughout the UN system and in the international community."

China considers Taiwan—where nationalist forces fled in 1949 after losing a civil war to the communists—to be a province awaiting reunification, by force if necessary. It responded to Blinken's statement with strident, albeit familiar, statements emphasizing its position

that Taiwan's government had no place on the global diplomatic stage. "Taiwan has no right to join the United Nations," Ma Xiaoguang, spokesman for the Taiwan Affairs Office in Beijing, told reporters.

"The United Nations is an international governmental organization composed of sovereign states... Taiwan is a part of China." The United States has long called for Taiwan's inclusion in UN activities. Taiwan's Foreign Minister Joseph Wu thanked the US for its support: "We appreciate it very much," he said. "We'll continue to fight for our rights in international organizations," Wu told reporters in Prague during an official tour, adding the situation was "growing more dangerous" as China keeps sending troops into the Taiwan Strait. "We are determined to defend ourselves," Wu said.

Defense of Taiwan

The latest statement adds to an escalation of diplomatic rhetoric and military posturing over Taiwan. China is regularly setting records for its number of warplane flights near the island. US President Joe Biden last week told a televised forum that the United States was ready to defend Taiwan from any Chinese invasion. Those comments were quickly walked back by the White House amid warnings from China, continuing a strategy of ambiguity on whether it would intervene militarily if China attacked.

The United States switched recognition in 1979 to Beijing. But Congress at the same time approved the Taiwan Relations Act that obligated the supply of weapons to the island for its self-defense. Blinken on Tuesday reiterated that the United States still recognized only Beijing. But he emphasized the democratic credentials of the island of 23 million people. "Taiwan



NEW TAIPEI CITY: This aerial view shows a mountain village of Jiufoen township, a tourist landmark in New Taipei City, northern Taiwan. — AFP

has become a democratic success story," Blinken said. "We are among the many UN member states who view Taiwan as a valued partner and trusted friend."

Blinken pointed to Taiwan's exclusion from meetings associated with the International Civil Aviation Organization and the World Health Organization. He noted that Taiwan was hailed for its "world-class" response to COVID-19 - which largely spared the

island after early intervention—and that tens of millions of passengers go through Taiwanese airports each year. Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen welcomed Blinken's remarks. "Grateful for #US support for expanding #Taiwan's international participation," she said on Twitter. "We stand ready to work with all like-minded partners to contribute our expertise in international organizations, mechanisms & events." — AFP



KABUL: Women hold placards during a protest in Kabul - calling for the international community to speak out in support of Afghans living under Taliban rule. — AFP

Anger over men-only foreign delegations to meet Taliban

ISLAMABAD: Global powers and aid groups that have loudly demanded an inclusive Afghanistan under the Taliban are now facing criticism for sending all-male delegations to Kabul to meet the hardline Islamists. Since seizing power in August, the Taliban have excluded women from their new caretaker government and put restrictions on work and education, drawing condemnation from the outside world.

But female representation has been little better among some governments and aid groups in their meetings in the capital with Afghanistan's new rulers, who are seeking international recognition. "Senior women in your teams should be leading your interactions with the Taliban... Don't exclude women," said Shaharad Akbar, the exiled head of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission. In a tweet addressing "governments and aid agencies", she called on them to "NOT NORMALISE Taliban's erasure of women".

'Sausage party'

Heather Barr from Human Rights Watch created a list, under the hashtag "sausageparty", of pictures posted by the Taliban of their meetings with delegations in Kabul. "Foreign countries and especially aid organizations should be leading by example," Barr told AFP. "No one should let the Taliban think that this kind of men-only world that they are creating... is normal."

The Taliban have posted dozens of photos on social

media of closed-door meetings with groups of foreign representatives, showing not a single woman. Among the many meetings highlighted was one earlier this month between British envoy Simon Gass and the Taliban's interim deputy prime ministers Abdul Ghani Baradar and Abdul Salam Hanafi, seated on a sofa in a lavish room. An official told AFP it was a coincidence that the special envoy and head of mission were both men. Pakistan, which has advised the Taliban on how to win international backing, also posted pictures and video of an all-male group accompanying the foreign minister and intelligence chief to Kabul. Fawzia Koofi, one of the negotiators in failed peace talks between the then Afghan government and the Taliban last year in Doha, voiced her anger. "As world leaders, when they talk about women's rights, they also need to act. They need to show that they believe in it, that it is not just a political statement," she told AFP.

Complacency 'not acceptable'

Even more concerning, Barr said, were the numerous pictures of meetings between the Taliban and humanitarian organizations that seemed to follow the same pattern. When contacted by AFP, the organizations on her list highlighted their dedication to women's rights and said they strived to include women in meetings with the Taliban. But several acknowledged holding at least one meeting with the hardline Islamists that included no women. The International Committee of the Red Cross, the UN children's agency, and Doctors Without Borders explained that on the photographed occasion, they had only sent small delegations of top leaders, who happened to be men. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies meanwhile said a last-minute scheduling change had meant a woman staff member due to take part had been unable to attend, turning one meeting into an all-male event.—AFP

regime rule. A taxi driver, he now lives on the front line because he cannot afford expensive rent elsewhere in Syria. "I live in a house without doors or windows," he said. "I can't even set up utilities or spend much on it... because I don't know if I'm going to stay or leave."

'Better than a tent'

In 2017, Russian-backed regime forces seized control of a part of Tadfif following battles with IS. During that period, Turkey and its Syrian rebel proxies launched a months-long operation in northern Syria targeting jihadists as well as Kurdish fighters labeled by Ankara as "terrorists". Turkey's Syrian proxies have since taken control of several areas in the country's north, including a pocket in northern Tadfif, where they command several neighborhoods.

Regime forces control the rest of Tadfif—the only town in Syria where regime and Ankara-backed rebels coexist in relative peace. "My children ask me: Our house is so close, will we never return to it?" Ibrahim lamented. The streets of Tadfif still bear evidence to the battles and bombardment that destroyed swaths of the town before IS was expelled from the area. At its northern entrance, bullet-riddled IS billboards loom over devastated streets and bombed-out buildings. At the front line, sandbags and large stones are stacked

Isolated and unpaid, Mongolian coal drivers queue at China border

TSAGAAN KHAD: Snaking across the barren Mongolian desert, a convoy crawls along the once-busy highway to the Chinese border - its truckers desperate to finally deliver their cargo of coal after months of brutal COVID-19 delays and no pay. Pre-pandemic, the route was packed with drivers delivering the vital fuel to China - the world's biggest coal importer - currently grappling with widespread power cuts threatening its economic growth. But now the line of trucks outside the tiny coal town of Tsagaan Khad has been reduced to a trickle, held up by China and Mongolia's strict coronavirus measures, leaving the drivers stranded without pay or company.

"Our families are calling us and saying they need wood, fuel, and clothes to wear in winter," said Davaasuren Tsogtsaikhan, 32, having waited three months to make a single delivery. "Life is hard here," he said. Last year, resource-rich Mongolia exported over 35 million tons of coking coal to China - this year so far is less than a third of that. Terrified any outbreak might make China slam the border shut, Mongolia has imposed strict coronavirus rules. Some 3,500 increasingly wretched drivers have been quarantined in camps of 40 people while they wait.

Undrakh Bold told AFP he spent 42 days waiting without making a delivery, having been quarantined outside capital Ulaanbaatar after one member of his group tested positive. After returning to Tsagaan Khad, the 43-year-old faced another 28 days of waiting. "If all of us test negative, we will be able to transport our coal the next day," the weary father-of-three said, as he queued to be tested. On the Chinese side, they are not allowed out of their cabs, or even to open windows. "I want to dump the coal in China, get my money and go back home," he said.

Drivers are tested for COVID-19 in Mongolia then bussed over the Chinese border in masks and hazmat suits, where they undergo yet another test. Mongolia's vast South Gobi province is home to 12 billion tons of coal reserves - a key supplier to Chinese iron ore smelters. But now many drivers are considering finding other work. "We worry about Covid test results all day and night," said trucker Davaasuren, preparing to take his first test.—AFP



TADEF: Syrian boys look through a hole at a border separating regime and rebel-held territory in the northern town of Tadfif, located about 32 kilometers east of Aleppo city. — AFP

Which Asia-Pacific nations are re-opening to visitors?

KUALA LUMPUR: Thailand's re-opening to vaccinated foreign tourists marks a major easing of border controls for Asia, where governments have been far slower to roll back coronavirus travel curbs than in much of the West. Here is a look at which countries are opening up across the Asia-Pacific region and those staying sealed off from the world.

Southeast Asia

Thailand will allow vaccinated travelers from 46 countries and territories to enter the kingdom without quarantining from Monday, as it seeks to revive its vital tourism industry. Other parts of the region—which largely escaped the pandemic's initial wave, only to be hit hard this year—are following its lead, albeit at a slower pace. Business hub Singapore has started quarantine-free travel for fully vaccinated travelers from 10 countries, including the United States and several European countries, and will add more soon.

Indonesia re-opened the resort island of Bali this month to tourists from select countries although, with travelers still required to do a five-day quarantine on arrival, the scheme has had a slow start. Vietnam plans to allow foreign visitors entry to the holiday island of Phu Quoc from next month and Malaysia has a similar plan for Langkawi island, while Cambodia will reopen beach spots Sihanoukville, Koh Rong and Dara Sakor from November 30. Some countries, including the Philippines and Myanmar, remain closed to foreign tourists.

East Asia

Mainland China, where COVID-19 first emerged last year, remains closed to overseas tourists, as is Japan. South Korea has started accepting visitors from 49 countries. A negative coronavirus test is required for all arrivals, with a limited exemption from a 14-day quarantine for those vaccinated in South Korea. Some of the world's toughest measures have been implemented in Hong Kong—with a maximum 21-day quarantine for incoming travelers—which has kept virus cases low but crippled the travel industry.

South Asia

Recovering from a devastating surge earlier this year, India re-opened for foreign tourists on charter flights this month and will allow in visitors on all flights from mid-November. Fully vaccinated travelers no longer have to undergo home quarantine, provided they are arriving from countries with which India has reciprocal arrangements for acceptance of WHO-approved vaccines. Last month, Nepal started issuing visas on arrival for vaccinated tourists and dropped quarantine requirements as it seeks to lure back foreign trekkers to its mountains. More than a million tourists visited the Himalayan country in 2019 - but numbers dropped by 80 percent last year.

Among the first countries to reopen borders was the popular holiday destination of the Maldives, which started allowing in foreign tourists in July last year. The number of tourists visiting the Indian Ocean atoll nation recovered to 500,000 last year following the re-opening, and authorities expect 1.5 million holidaymakers this year—just shy of the figure in 2019. Sri Lanka opened its international borders for fully vaccinated tourists without any quarantine requirements on October 7, while Pakistan allows in foreign visitors as long as they have proof of vaccination and a negative Covid-19 test.

Australia and the Pacific

Australia introduced some of the world's toughest border restrictions in response to the pandemic, banning citizens from travelling overseas without permission. But the government announced yesterday that the ban would be lifted, with the country's border also set to open to skilled workers and international students by year's end. New Zealand remains closed to foreign visitors, with no date for reopening. The South Pacific nation of Fiji, whose economy is heavily tourism-dependent, will allow vaccinated travelers from countries across Europe and Asia to enter quarantine-free, as well as those from the United States, starting December 1.—AFP