

International

UN summit to close without
Taleban, Myanmar speeches

100 leaders defy coronavirus fears to meet in person

UNITED NATIONS: The UN General Assembly in New York ended yesterday but without speeches by those in power in Afghanistan and Myanmar, one of many quirks at this year's diplomatic marathon that saw 100 leaders defy coronavirus fears to meet in person. The UN representative of Afghanistan's former regime was expected to defy the Taleban with an address after the group requested its new foreign minister be allowed to speak instead.

Taleban send
letter to UN's
Guterres

The Taleban wrote a letter to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres last Monday requesting that Amir Khan Muttaqi be allowed to "participate." The letter noted that Ghulam Isacqai, Afghanistan's UN envoy under Ashraf Ghani, who was ousted last month, "no longer represents" Afghanistan at the United Nations.

The plea was due to be considered by a committee that included the United States, Russia and China, but a UN official told AFP the meeting didn't take place. A diplomat said the Taleban sent their request "too late," paving the way for Isacqai, whom the UN still recognizes as Afghanistan's representative, to speak. If he does take the opportunity, he could demand a strengthening of sanctions against the Taleban, as he did during a Security Council meeting on September 9.

ICC prosecutor
targets Taleban,
IS-K in probe

THE HAGUE: The International Criminal Court's new chief prosecutor said yesterday he wants to focus his investigation in Afghanistan on the Taleban and Islamic State-Khorasan, and to "deprioritise" alleged war crimes by US forces. Karim Khan said he had asked judges to allow him to relaunch the probe-put on hold last year at the request of Kabul's then-government while it said it would investigate war crimes itself-following the Taleban takeover in August.

"Recent developments in Afghanistan and the change in the national authorities, represent a significant change of circumstances," Khan, who took over as prosecutor in June at the Hague-based court, said in a statement. "After reviewing matters carefully, I have reached the conclusion that, at this time, there is no longer the prospect of genuine and effective domestic investigations." Khan asked judges for "expedited" permission to resume the probe. The Afghanistan probe's inclusion of alleged US crimes had infuriated Washington.

The administration of former US president Donald



NEW YORK: Delegates wait the start of the 76th session of the United Nations General Assembly at UN headquarters in New York. — AFP

The week of speeches was originally due to end with Afghanistan, Myanmar and Guinea, but the situation of the latter two countries also stirred up further intrigue going into the last day. A high-level UN diplomat told AFP that "an agreement" had been reached between the United States, Russia and China preventing Myanmar's UN ambassador-an outspoken supporter of the democracy movement who has refused junta orders to quit-from speaking.

'Low profile'

Kyaw Moe Tun, chosen by former leader Aung San Suu Kyi, is supported by the international community and has retained his seat at the United Nations following the February 1 military coup. In May, the junta

appointed a former general to replace him, but the United Nations has not yet approved the appointment. Kyaw Moe Tun was the victim of a recent alleged conspiracy foiled by US investigators that plotted to either force him to resign or kill him if he refused. He told AFP his plans for the General Assembly were "low profile." Diplomats are, however, expecting to hear from Guinea's representative to the UN, Aly Diane, even though he is an appointee of the former president who was deposed in a military coup earlier this month.

It is another curiosity at this year's high-level meet, which saw some 100 leaders descend on the UN headquarters after last year's event was mostly virtual. "How encouraging to see the General

Trump imposed sanctions on Khan's predecessor Fatou Bensouda over the issue. Khan said that he would now narrow his focus in Afghanistan due to the "limited resources" of the ICC as it investigates various situations around the world. "I have therefore decided to focus my office's investigations in Afghanistan on crimes allegedly committed by the Taleban and the Islamic State-Khorasan Province ("IS-K") and to deprioritise other aspects of this investigation," he said.

This was because of the "gravity, scale and continuing nature of alleged crimes by the Taleban and the Islamic State" and the need to "construct credible cases capable of being proved beyond reasonable doubt in the courtroom," Khan said. The ICC prosecutor specifically mentioned the deadly August 26 attack on Kabul airport claimed by IS-K in which 13 US service members and more than 100 Afghan civilians were killed.

"In relation to those aspects of the investigation that have not been prioritized, my office will remain alive to its evidence preservation responsibilities, to the extent they arise," he said. The ICC was set up in 2002 to investigate the world's worst crimes in cases where member states were either unable or unwilling to investigate them themselves. Former prosecutor Bensouda asked ICC judges to approve a formal investigation into Afghanistan in 2017. Appeals judges ruled in March 2020 that it could go ahead.— AFP

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BANGKOK: Anti-government protesters confront the police during a demonstration in Bangkok yesterday as activists call for the resignation of Thailand's Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha over the government's handling of the COVID-19 crisis. — AFP

Thailand to cut
quarantine for
tourists

BANGKOK: Thailand is to cut the quarantine for vaccinated travelers to seven days starting in October, officials said yesterday, as it seeks to revive its battered tourism industry. Pre-pandemic Thailand attracted nearly 40 million visitors a year, but COVID-related travel restrictions have hammered the sector, contributing to the economy's worst performance in more than 20 years. The kingdom is pushing to reopen despite still being in the grips of a deadly third wave of infections, driven by the Delta variant.

Authorities said that starting on Friday, the quarantine period for fully jabbed visitors will be seven days, halved from the current 14-day period - provided they have a vaccination certificate. Visitors without certification will have to quarantine for 10 days if they enter by plane and 14 days if they come over land. All will require at least two negative COVID tests. Government deputy spokeswoman Rachada Dhanadirek waved off concerns about unvaccinated travelers entering the kingdom. "I think these measures are effective enough to screen whether if they are infected," she told AFP.

The relaxation also applies to Thailand's so-called "sandbox" scheme in Phuket, its most popular beach island, which was launched in July as a first step towards restarting tourism. The scheme allowed vaccinated tourists to enter without having to undergo a strict hotel quarantine, and after 14 days spent on the island - as well as three negative COVID tests - to travel elsewhere in Thailand. From Friday, this 14-day restriction will also be cut to seven days. Authorities plan to reopen five other tourist destinations, including Bangkok, using the sandbox model on November 1, followed by 20 more in December. One cloud hanging over Thailand's plans is the travel advice of other countries discouraging would-be tourists from visiting. Britain and the US have issued travel advisories against Thailand due to its rising case numbers and low vaccination rates.—AFP

But a growing number of US allies have transited the route as Beijing intensifies its military threats towards Taiwan and solidifies its control over the disputed South China Sea. Canadian, French and Australian warships have all made voyages through the Taiwan Strait in recent years, sparking protests from China. Taiwan's defense minister Chiu Kuo-cheng confirmed to reporters that a foreign vessel had sailed through the waterway but did not state which country it was from.

Taiwan's 23 million people live under constant threat of invasion by authoritarian China, which has vowed to seize the island one day-by force if necessary. Beijing has stepped up military, diplomatic and economic pressure on Taiwan since the election of President Tsai Ing-wen in 2016, who views the island as "already independent". Last year, Chinese military jets made a record 380 incursions into Taiwan's defence zone, and the number of incursions for the first eight months of this year has already exceeded 400.—AFP



KABUL: A Taleban fighter stands guard as a Pakistan International Airlines plane takes off with passengers onboard at the airport in Kabul. — AFP

UK's warship makes
rare transit through
Taiwan Strait

TAIPEI: The Royal Navy said a British warship was sailing through the Taiwan Strait yesterday, a move that challenges Beijing's claim to the sensitive waterway and marks a rare voyage by a non-US military vessel. "After a busy period working with partners and allies in the East China Sea, we are now en route through the Taiwan Strait to visit Vietnam and the Vietnam People's Navy," read a tweet from the official account for HMS Richmond, a frigate deployed with Britain's aircraft carrier strike group.

Local media said it was the first time a British warship had transited through the narrow waterway separating Taiwan and mainland China. The British navy survey ship HMS Enterprise transited through the strait in 2019. The UK's defense ministry did not respond to a request for comment. US warships regularly conduct "freedom of navigation" exercises in the strait and trigger angry responses from Beijing, which claims Taiwan and surrounding waters-and almost all of the South China Sea.

The US and most other countries view those areas as international waters that should be open to all vessels. China's initial response to the British warship's passage was muted yesterday. "We hope the relevant countries can do more to build mutual trust between countries and uphold peace and security in the region," foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying told reporters. Until recently, Washington was the main global power willing to sail through the Taiwan Strait.

Assembly meet again in person," Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo said Friday. "Don't we all aspire to 'get back to normal?'" he asked. General Assembly President Abdulla Shahid agreed in an interview with AFP. "It is clear that diplomacy greatly benefits from the creativity, exchange of ideas, discussions and flexibility that comes with in person meetings," he said.

Submarine spat

Many leaders chose to send video messages instead, however. French President Emmanuel Macron initially said he would attend, before opting to send a video message that was to be played the day after US President Joe Biden spoke. But now, Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian will speak for France, whose presence all week was overshadowed by a spat with the United States over a mega submarine deal with Australia. The address will be delivered via a pre-recorded video message, despite Le Drian being at the UN for five days this week. "It is rare for one of the five permanent members of the Security Council to intervene on the last day. I've never seen it," said a European diplomat, on condition of anonymity. But despite the tensions and concern over growing lack of mutual trust among the international community, Shahid said this year's General Assembly led him "to the conclusion that we all share the same concerns and wish the same outcome."

Washington, fearing the event would be a hotbed for the coronavirus, had tried to dissuade leaders from traveling to New York, where a vaccine mandate is in place. Strict rules over masks and social distancing were imposed, with only seven people per delegation allowed. However, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken was flanked by 20 people when he walked the corridors of the UN.—AFP

News in brief

Moon raises dog meat ban

SEOUL: South Korea's President Moon Jae-in raised banning the eating of dogs in the country yesterday, his office said, a traditional practice that is becoming an international embarrassment. The meat has long been a part of South Korean cuisine with about one million dogs believed to be eaten annually, but consumption has declined as more people embrace dogs as companions rather than livestock. The practice is now something of a taboo among younger generations and pressure from animal rights activists has also been mounting. "Hasn't the time come to prudently consider prohibiting dog meat consumption?" Moon told Prime Minister Kim Bo-kyum during a weekly meeting, according to the presidential spokeswoman.—AFP

Earthquake shakes Philippines

MANILA: A strong earthquake hit off the Philippines' main island yesterday, but there were no immediate reports of damage, the US Geological Survey and local officials said. The deep 5.7-magnitude quake struck off Batangas province on Luzon island at 1:12 am, with residents in the nearby capital of Manila woken by their buildings shaking. The quake was recorded at a depth of 98 kilometers, the USGS said. The local seismological agency warned of damage and aftershocks. Deep quakes tend to do less damage than shallow tremors. But authorities near the epicenter said they had not received any reports of damage. "It was really strong," Jose Clyde Yayong, a disaster officer in Tagaytay city in the neighboring province of Cavite. "So far there are no untoward incidents relating to the earthquake."—AFP

Five killed in Colombia

BOGOTA: Five people were killed in an attack by suspected dissident members of Colombia's FARC rebels, officials said Sunday. The deadly incident took place at a "public establishment" in a rural area of Tumaco, in the southern department of Narino, the army said. Colombia is experiencing some of the worst attacks by armed groups since a peace deal was signed with the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) in 2016. Suspected FARC dissidents belonging to the Urias Rendon column "arrived at the establishment in a vehicle, firing several shots indiscriminately," an army statement said. Two people were killed at the scene and another three died of gunshot wounds after being transported to hospital. Six other people were injured.—AFP

Lebanon blast probe suspended

BEIRUT: The lead investigator into the deadly 2020 Beirut port blast suspended his probe yesterday after an ex-minister he has called in for questioning requested his removal, a Lebanese court official said. In a second such suspension, Tarek Bitar will pause blast investigations until a court votes on whether to replace him in response to a complaint filed last week by ex-interior minister Nohad Machnouk, the official said. Machnouk is one of a raft of top officials suspected of negligence ahead of the port explosion that killed more than 200 people on August 4 last year. If removed, Bitar would be the second investigator to be sacked since the explosion amid widespread accusations of obstruction by Lebanon's political barons, who have largely dodged interrogation. "Bitar has paused his investigation and all procedures linked to the case pending a ruling by the court of appeals," the official said.—AFP