



China population to begin shrinking by 2025: Officials

Afghans cast doubt on Kabul killing of Al-Qaeda chief

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KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia's Speaker of the Dewan Rakyat, Azhar Azizan Harun (4R), and Speaker of the US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi (3L) posing with their delegation before a meeting at the Parliament House in Kuala Lumpur. —AFP

US warns China against overreacting

China need not turn any visit by Pelosi into a 'crisis'

SINGAPORE: The White House on Monday warned China against overreacting to a trip by US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan, saying she would have every right to visit the self-ruled island despite Beijing viewing it as a highly provocative challenge.

China need not turn any visit by Pelosi into a "crisis," White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby told reporters, even as he warned that Beijing may be "positioning" itself for a show of military strength around the island.

Media reports have said that Pelosi, currently on an official Asia tour, will stop off in Taiwan and meet President Tsai Ing-wen on Wednesday-if so, the highest-level US visit to Taipei in decades. Beijing, which views Taiwan as its territory, has reacted furiously to the idea, warning President Joe Biden that his administration was playing "with fire" and announcing a series of live-fire military drills in the Taiwan Straits.

While the White House and State Department are both understood to be opposed to Pelosi's trip, Kirby made it clear that the speaker-who is second in line to the US presidency-was entitled to go where she pleased.

"The speaker has the right to visit Taiwan," he told reporters, adding: "There is no reason for Beijing to turn a potential visit consistent with longstanding US policies into some sort of crisis." Kirby cited intelligence

that China was preparing possible military provocations that could include firing missiles in the Taiwan Strait or "large scale" incursions into Taiwan airspace.

Pelosi kicked her trip off Monday with a stop in Singapore, where Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong urged her at a meeting to strive for "stable" ties with Beijing. Her itinerary also includes Malaysia, South Korea and Japan, but the prospect of a Taiwan visit has dominated attention.

'Nothing has changed'

Speculation about Pelosi's plans has coincided with an uptick in military activity across the region. Kirby said the United States "will not be intimidated" from continuing to move freely in the Pacific region. However, he sought to lower tension by stressing several times that US policy was unchanged toward Taiwan. This means support for its self-ruling government, while diplomatically recognising Beijing over Taipei and opposing either a full independence bid by Taiwan or a forceful takeover by China.



'Speaker has the right to visit Taiwan'

"Nothing has changed," he said. "There's certainly no reason for this to come to blows." Kirby confirmed that Pelosi is traveling on a military aircraft and said Washington does not fear a direct attack but warned it "raises the stakes of a miscalculation."

Pelosi's office has said her trip "will focus on mutual security, economic partnership and democratic governance in the Indo-Pacific region," referring to the Asia-Pacific. The statement did not mention Taiwan. But visits by US officials there are usually kept secret until delegations land.

China's ambassador to the United Nations Zhang Hun labelled such a visit "very much dangerous, very much provocative" as he spoke to reporters Monday. "If the US insists on making the visit, China will take firm and strong measures to safeguard our sovereignty and territorial integrity," he said at a briefing.

The Global Times, China's state-run tabloid, suggested that Pelosi might use "emergency excuses like an aircraft fault or refuelling" to land at a Taiwanese

airport. "If she dares to stop in Taiwan, it will be the moment to ignite the powder keg of the situation in the Taiwan Straits," Hu Xijin, a former Global Times editor and now commentator, tweeted.

And the Chinese army's Eastern Theater Command shared footage on social media site Weibo featuring a combat-ready army with fighters and helicopters taking off, amphibious troops landing on a beach and a stream of missiles raining down on various targets.

"We will bury all enemies who invade our territory," a short text accompanying the footage read. "We're ready to fight," it added. "Advance towards a joint combat and a victorious war."

Taiwan government silent

Taiwan's 23 million people have long lived with the possibility of an invasion, but the threat has intensified under Chinese President Xi Jinping. American officials often make discreet visits to Taiwan to show support but a Pelosi trip would be higher-profile than any in recent history.

Taiwan's government has remained silent on the prospect of a Pelosi visit and there has been minimal local press coverage. "I really hate what the Chinese are doing," Hsu Ching-feng, a fruit vendor in Taipei, told AFP. "But there's nothing us common folks can do about it but ignore them." —AFP

Death toll from Kentucky flooding rises to 37

JACKSON: The death toll from flooding in eastern Kentucky rose to 37 on Monday as more rain hampered recovery operations and possible severe weather overnight threatened to provoke further damage. "We are ending the day with more heart-breaking news out of Eastern Kentucky. We can confirm the death toll has now risen to 37, with so many more still missing," tweeted Andy Beshear, governor of the south-central US state.

"Let us pray for these families and come together to wrap our arms around our fellow Kentuckians," he added. Beshear has said he expects the death toll to continue to rise as search and rescue teams fan out across flood-hit areas and recover more bodies.

Their efforts were hampered by more rain on Monday, with a series of new storms forecast to

arrive overnight. "If things weren't hard enough on the people of this region, they're getting rain right now," Beshear said earlier in the day. "There is severe storm potential today in all of the impacted areas."

"That is just not right." The National Weather Service issued flood watches for most of eastern Kentucky for the evening and into Tuesday morning, warning that "a complex of storms is expected to move over the region tonight."

"Heavy rain rates which could lead to flash flooding along with severe thunderstorms are possible," the weather agency tweeted. Last week, some areas in eastern Kentucky received more than eight inches (20 centimeters) of rain in a 24-hour period, provoking unprecedented flash flooding.

The water level of the North Fork of the Kentucky River at Whitesburg rose to a staggering 20 feet within hours, well above its previous record of 14.7 feet. Some areas in the mountainous Appalachia region are still inaccessible following the flooding that turned roads into rivers, washed out bridges and swept away houses.

The floods hit a region of Kentucky that was already suffering from grinding poverty-driven by the decline of the coal industry that was the heart



BUCKHORN: Volunteers work at a distribution center of donated goods in Buckhorn, Kentucky, following historic flooding in Eastern Kentucky. —AFP

of its economy. President Joe Biden has issued a disaster declaration for the state, allowing federal aid to supplement state and local recovery efforts.

The eastern Kentucky flooding is the latest in a series of extreme weather events that scientists say are an unmistakable sign of climate change. Nearly 60 people were killed in western Kentucky by a tornado in December 2021. —AFP

Kansas votes on abortion rights in US test case

LEAWOOD, United States: Voters in the Midwestern state of Kansas headed to the polls Tuesday in the first major ballot on abortion since the US Supreme Court ended the national right to the procedure in June.

The vote is heavy with consequences for Kansans themselves, who will decide whether to remove the right to an abortion from the traditionally conservative state's constitution. But it is also being seen as a test case for abortion rights nationwide, as Republican-dominated legislatures rush to impose strict bans on the procedure following the Supreme Court's decision to overturn Roe v. Wade.

Other states including California and Kentucky are set to vote on the issue in November, at the same time as midterm elections to Congress in which both Republicans and Democrats hope to mobilize their supporters nationwide around the question of abortion.

The Kansas ballot centers on a 2019 ruling by the state's supreme court that guarantees access to abortion-currently up to 22 weeks. In response, the Republican-dominated state legislature introduced an amendment known as "Value Them Both" that

would scrap the constitutional right-with the stated aim of handing regulation of the procedure back to lawmakers. But in the opposing camp, activists see the campaign as a barely-masked bid to clear the way for an outright ban-a conservative state legislator having already introduced a bill that would ban abortion without exceptions for rape, incest, or the life of the mother.

For Ashley All, spokeswoman for pro-abortion rights campaign Kansans for Constitutional Freedom, the amendment would deal a blow to "personal autonomy." Activists also complain that the phrasing of the ballot question is counterintuitive, and potentially confusing: voting "Yes" to the amendment means abortion rights being curbed, while people who wish to keep those rights intact must vote "No."

All eyes on Kansas

Abortion rights advocates in Kansas are looking nervously to neighboring Oklahoma and Missouri which are among at least eight states to have passed near-total bans-the latter making no exceptions for rape or incest-while Midwestern Indiana adopted its own rigid ban on Saturday.

Kara Miller Karns, a voter in Leawood, Kansas, said she planned to vote for the status quo on Tuesday, saying it was "not acceptable" for her daughters to grow up with fewer rights than she did. But in the same neighborhood, 43-year-old Christine Vasquez said she planned to back the constitutional amendment-in hope it would clear the way for a future vote on an abortion ban.



LEAWOOD, United States: Residents vote early at Leawood City Hall in Leawood, Kansas. Voters in the US state of Kansas headed to the polls on August 2, 2022. —AFP

"I believe that life starts at conception," she told AFP ahead of the ballot. The outcome in Kansas could mean a boost or a blow to either side of the highly charged US abortion debate-and the eyes of the nation will be fixed on the state on Tuesday.

Kansas leans heavily toward the Republican party, which favors stricter abortion regulations, but a 2021 survey from Fort Hays State University found that fewer than 20 percent of Kansas respondents agreed that abortion should be illegal even in cases of rape or incest. —AFP

Texas man gets seven years for Capitol riot

WASHINGTON: A Texas militia member was sentenced to more than seven years in prison on Monday, the longest jail term yet for a participant in the January 6 attack on the US Capitol by supporters of former president Donald Trump.

Guy Reffitt, 49, was convicted in March of bringing a gun to Washington, interfering with police and impeding an official proceeding-the certification by Congress of Democrat Joe Biden's victory in the November 2020 presidential election.

Reffitt, a member of a right-wing militia called the Texas Three Percenters, was also found guilty of obstruction for threatening his teenage son and daughter if they spoke to law enforcement about his involvement in the attack on the Capitol.

Reffitt's then 18-year-old son did go to the FBI despite his father's warning that "traitors get shot" and delivered emotional testimony against his father in court. US District Judge Dabney Friedrich sentenced Reffitt to 87 months in prison, the stiffest sentence meted out to a Capitol riot defendant so far.

Two men who pleaded guilty to assaulting police officers were sentenced previously to 63 months in prison. US Attorney Matthew Graves said Reffitt's sentence "holds him accountable for his violent, unconscionable conduct."

"Guy Reffitt came to the Capitol on Jan. 6 armed and determined to instigate violence," Graves said in a statement. "He and others contributed to the many assaults on law enforcement officers that day, putting countless more people-including legislators-at risk."

Reffitt, an oil industry worker from Wylie, Texas, was the first person to go on trial on charges stemming from the January 6, 2021 attack on Congress. Dozens of other participants in the Capitol riot have been sentenced after entering into plea agreements.

Video of Reffitt confronting police on the steps of the Capitol and urging on the pro-Trump crowd was played for the jury during his trial. Prosecutors also displayed text messages from Reffitt in which he promised to drag lawmakers out of Congress "by their hair."

Reffitt was wearing body armor and a helmet, carrying zip-tie handcuffs and armed with a .40 caliber handgun when he arrived at the Capitol, according to prosecutors. —AFP