



Pakistan court  
shuts military  
golf course

## French police arrest man over 2012 Alps killing of UK family



ATLANTA: US President Joe Biden speaks to a crowd at the Atlanta University Center Consortium, part of both Morehouse College and Clark Atlanta University, on Tuesday. — AFP

# Biden gambles big on voting rights reform

## President's bid for suspension of filibuster rule is controversial

ATLANTA: President Joe Biden took a major political gamble Tuesday in calling for a break in the Senate's supermajority rule so that Democrats can override Republican opposition to voting rights reforms that he called crucial to saving US democracy. Speaking in Atlanta, Georgia, the cradle of the civil rights movement, Biden - who called last year's Capitol riot by Donald Trump supporters an "attempted coup" - declared "this is the moment to decide to defend our elections, to defend our democracy."

He challenged Democrats holding a razor-thin majority in the Senate to stand up for two bills that would expand access to polls and prevent practices that Biden said are being used to suppress black and other Democratic-leaning voters. "Each one of the members of the Senate will be judged by history for where they stood before the vote and after the vote. There's no escape," Biden said.

The 50 Democrats in the Senate support the two bills. However, under current the supermajority requirement, 60 votes are needed to get them passed. Biden said that if Republicans don't cooperate then the supermajority requirement, called the

filibuster, should be tossed to get the voting rights acts through.

Facing Republican obstruction, "we have no option but to change the Senate rules including getting rid of the filibuster for this." It's a high-risk, high-gain issue for Biden, who is infuriating Republicans, while also trying to balance the more conservative wing of his party with the increasingly frustrated black community.

### History is watching

Coming off a powerful speech last week marking the Jan 6 anniversary of the pro-Trump riot, Biden described the push to enshrine greater voter protections as "a turning point". Democrats accuse Republican state legislatures of enacting a spate of laws deliberately restricting the voting rights of minorities and curtailing early voting and mail-in voting in an effort to suppress Democratic support.

Biden said Republicans are passing local laws "designed to suppress your vote, to subvert our elections". Then throwing down the gauntlet to the Senate, Biden said: "History has never been kind to those who sided with voter suppression over voter

rights. I ask every elected official in America: how do you want to be remembered?"

### Political risk

Republicans describe the Democrats' Senate push for voting rights as an attempt to manipulate the election landscape by switching power to federal authorities. They are unanimous in opposing the two bills, which Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said could come up for a vote as early as yesterday. Biden's bid for a suspension of the filibuster rule is also controversial.

Republicans warn that a supposedly one-off maneuver could open the floodgates to lifting the filibuster on all sorts of issues, thereby ending any semblance of bipartisanship in the chamber. Lead Republican Senator Mitch McConnell called the idea of suspending the filibuster for voting rights reforms "disturbing" and an attempt to "break our institutions to get a political outcome they want".

Perhaps worse for Biden, the maneuver needs unanimous Democratic support to happen - and that's far from assured, with at least two of the more conservative Democratic senators clearly skeptical.

If circumventing the filibuster fails, Biden will not only see the voting rights bills defeated but emerge from the fight looking politically weakened.

### 'Keep the faith'

The president traveled to Georgia at a time when his approval ratings are stuck in the low 40s and Republicans are predicted to take over Congress in November midterm elections. He not only faces ferocious pushback from Republicans on his voter rights initiative, but complaints from black activists - a crucial part of his coalition - that he has done too little, too late. Underlining Biden's shaky political standing, prominent black politician and Georgia voting rights activist Stacey Abrams missed his Atlanta event due to what Biden called a "scheduling" glitch, while a big civil rights group said it was boycotting due to lack of tangible progress. Still, the speech was the boldest step yet into the issue by Biden, who attended a wreath laying at the crypt of slain civil rights icon Martin Luther King Jr and visited the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church ahead of his speech. "Keep the faith," Biden said as he entered the Ebenezer Baptist church. — AFP

## Several killed in blast in Somali capital

MOGADISHU: Several people were killed yesterday in a suicide car bomb blast in Somalia's capital Mogadishu, officials said. The attack was claimed by the Al-Shabaab jihadist group, which said in a brief statement that it was targeting "foreign officers". It took place only days after Somali leaders had agreed on a new timetable for long-delayed elections in the troubled Horn of Africa country.

The government said in a statement on Twitter that it condemned the "cowardly" suicide attack, and gave a toll of four dead and six injured. "Such acts of terrorism will not derail the peace & the ongoing development in the country. We must unite in the fight

against terrorism." Local government security officer Mohamed Abdi had earlier told AFP that at least six people were killed.

"It has also caused devastation in the area," he said, warning that the toll could be higher because a large number of people were in the area. The United States, the largest foreign donor to Somalia's embattled government, condemned the attack and extended its sympathies to the families of those killed and injured.

### 'Destroyed buildings'

Witnesses said a multi-vehicle private security convoy escorting foreigners was passing by the area in southern Mogadishu when the explosion hit. "I saw some of the passengers injured and being carried after the blast," said one witness, Osman Hassan. Another witness, Hassan Nur, said: "The blast was so huge that it has destroyed most of the buildings nearby the road and vehicles passing by the area. I saw several dead and



MOGADISHU: A general view of the scene of a car bomb explosion yesterday. — AFP

wounded people strewn in the road."

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia said contrary to early reports "there were no UN personnel or contractors in the convoy targeted in the suicide attack". Somalia has been in the grip of a political crisis since February last year

after the president's term expired before fresh elections were held. A disagreement over the election process set off a bitter power struggle between President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, better known as Farmajo, and his Prime Minister Mohamed Hussein Roble. — AFP

## NATO, Russia lay out differences on Ukraine crisis

BRUSSELS: NATO allies warned Russia yesterday that they would not compromise on the alliance's right to defend its eastern members to avoid further conflict in Ukraine, but invited Moscow to further talks on calming security concerns. Speaking after talks with Russian envoys at NATO headquarters in Brussels, alliance Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg warned: "There are significant differences between NATO allies and Russia on these issues."

Stoltenberg said that it would be impossible for the 30 NATO members to agree to Moscow's core demands for a new security order in Europe, and in particular added that Russia would have no veto on Ukraine's right to eventually join the alliance. President Vladimir Putin's government has issued a

series of demands for the West to rule out accepting new members like Ukraine, Georgia or Finland on its eastern flanks and demanded limits on allied deployments in former Soviet allies that joined NATO after the Cold War.

Stoltenberg said it was "positive" that the two sides had been able to sit down together, reviving the NATO-Russia Council platform, and that NATO members had invited Russia to agree to a series of talks to discuss arms control and "many other issues to prevent a new armed conflict." "Russia was not in a position to agree on that proposal. They didn't reject it either, but the Russian representatives made it clear that they needed some time to come back to NATO with an answer," he said.

Stoltenberg warned, however, that Russia would have no veto over any bid by Ukraine to join NATO and called for a "de-escalation" in Russia's military build-up on its neighbor's border. "Ukraine as a sovereign nation, Ukraine has the right to self-defense. Ukraine is not a threat to Russia," he said. "It is Russia that is the aggressor. It is Russia that has used force and continues to use force against Ukraine. And then they're building up, with around

100,000 troops, artillery, armor, drones, tens of thousands of combat ready troops and threatening rhetoric - that's the problem."

The West defends NATO's "open-door policy" towards potential future members, while Moscow is demanding a cast-iron guarantee that the alliance will not expand further towards its territory. Russia denies that its massive troop build-up around already partially occupied Ukraine is a threat, but the deployment has forced Washington to engage with Moscow to head off fears of an all-out military confrontation. Before yesterday, the NATO-Russia council had not met since 2019. NATO and Russia broke off practical cooperation in 2014 after Moscow occupied and annexed the Ukrainian region of Crimea.

Russia's diplomatic mission to the alliance was withdrawn in October last year after eight of its staff were expelled on allegations of espionage. But the former ambassador - now a deputy foreign minister - Alexander Grushko was back to confront Stoltenberg and US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, having earlier this week described the meeting as a "moment of truth". — AFP

## Kazakh leader vows to rebuild city hit by clashes

ALMATY: President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev visited Almaty yesterday for the first time since clashes there left dozens dead, vowing to repair damage to oil-rich Kazakhstan's largest city and financial hub. "The task now is to rebuild the city in the shortest possible time (...) I have no doubt the city will be restored," he told a government meeting, according to a statement on the presidential website.

The visit comes on the eve of the start of the announced withdrawal of a Russia-led military contingent of more than 2,000 troops that were sent to help restore order after peaceful protests gave way to violence and looting. "Tomorrow begins the organized withdrawal of the peace-keeping contingent" from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the alliance led by Moscow, confirmed Tokayev.

Almaty showed further signs of a return to normal life yesterday with many more people out on the streets than last week and most restaurants and shops open. AFP correspondents saw helicopters flying overhead as Tokayev met officials in the city where municipal services were cleaning up broken glass from shop windows smashed by looters.

Tokayev said Russian and allied forces "played a very important role in terms of stabilizing the situation in the country". "Without a doubt, it was of great psychological importance in repelling the aggression of terrorists and bandits. The mission can be considered very successful," he added. Tokayev also spoke with relatives of law enforcement personnel killed in the riots and visited injured people in hospital, the presidential website said. Almaty airport, closed since last week after being ransacked, is due to resume service today for national and international flights, according to the Kazakhstan Civil Aviation Committee. The scale of non-military casualties is not yet clear but hundreds of people were injured and police said they arrested more than 10,000 people. — AFP