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SUVA, Fiji: US Vice-President Kamala Harris speaks via video-link to the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) in Suva on July 13, 2022. — AFP

# US launches Pacific push with new embassies

## Harris pledges \$600 million in funding for the region

SUVA, Fiji: The United States launched a major push into the Pacific Wednesday as it seeks to hold off China's advances in the region, with Vice President Kamala Harris announcing the opening of two new embassies at a key regional summit.

Washington will open missions in Tonga and Kiribati and also appoint its first-ever Pacific regional envoy, Harris said as she pledged \$600 million in funding for the region in her address to the Pacific Islands Forum in Fiji. The video-link appearance was a diplomatic coup for the United States, with China's attempts to secure a meeting on the sidelines of the summit rebuffed.

The forum marks the first time Pacific leaders have met since the Solomon Islands signed a controversial security pact with China earlier this year. And the mounting US-China rivalry in the Pacific has directed intense interest towards this year's meeting, which brings together leaders from across the strategically important region.

Tongan Prime Minister Siaosi Sovaleni told AFP his country was "really happy that the US will be opening an embassy in Tonga, it will be the first time". "It is a big milestone. We are very happy we are finally having

a US presence in Tonga," he said. Forum secretary general Henry Puna also welcomed Harris' announcements, calling them "a breath of fresh air". "We have a long history of association and friendship with the US. But in recent years, they've gone missing from the region," he told AFP.



**'We are finally having a US presence in Tonga'**

### US v China

At least one official from the local Chinese embassy was in the room for the vice president's address and was asked to move from an area reserved for media, causing a stir among organisers. Harris said she and President Joe Biden acknowledged the Pacific may not

have previously received enough attention or support in the past.

"We are going to change that," she promised, adding the United States wanted to "significantly deepen our presence in the Pacific region". Washington's Pacific push-backed by a decade-long pledge of \$60 million annually to the Forum Fisheries Agency and the relaunch of the Peace Corps in the Pacific-reflected a desire to "embark on a new chapter", Harris said.

The United States will also appoint its first-ever regional envoy and launch an inaugural national strategy for the region. Harris said the United States wanted to collaborate on maritime security, disaster relief and infrastructure projects that "do not result in insurmountable debt"—a subtle swipe at Beijing's lending policies. Pacific expert Tess Cain said "it was a bit of a surprise that the vice president got that speaking slot", given the forum is traditionally restricted to Pacific leaders, Australia and New Zealand.

### Australia arrives

New Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese landed Wednesday in Fiji to attend the forum, his first

visit to the Pacific since his election victory. Albanese will try to mend his nation's fractured relationships within the region after Australia's attempts to muzzle climate change announcements saw the last forum meeting descend into shouting and tears.

"Under the previous Australian government, they simply refused to do anything meaningful on climate change. And this has been felt as a personal affront by a generation of Pacific leaders," Pacific expert Wesley Morgan of the Climate Council said.

But US-China rivalry and a shock decision by Kiribati's Beijing-aligned leaders to withdraw from the forum on the eve of the summit have threatened to sideline climate at the talks. Tuvaluan Foreign Minister Simon Kofe told AFP it was "the responsibility of the Pacific to reaffirm the importance of climate change". New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said there was a need for "greater transparency" about what China had agreed with the Solomon Islands. The United States and its allies worry China is using security aid to develop a military foothold in the Pacific Islands. Ardern expressed "deep concern" about any moves that caused "the militarisation of our region." — AFP



LONDON: Conservative MP and Britain's Minister of State for Trade Policy, Penny Mordaunt (2R), leaves after attending the launch of her campaign to become the next leader of the Conservative party, in central London. — AFP

## Tories hold first round of voting for new PM

LONDON: Britain's ruling Conservative party was Wednesday to winnow down the eight candidates vying to succeed Prime Minister Boris Johnson amid growing acrimony over alleged dirty tricks. Johnson was to face one of his last sessions of Prime Minister's Questions in the House of Commons before his successor is announced on September 5, after controversially blocking an opposition bid to evict him sooner.

The Labour party had been seeking Wednesday to force a Commons vote of no confidence in Johnson's premiership, arguing the UK can ill-afford weeks more of Tory infighting given a cost-of-living crisis and other challenges, such as the war in Ukraine.

But the government refused to give the motion time for debate, in a move dubbed unprecedented by constitutional experts. Johnson was forced last week to announce his resignation after a stunning cabinet revolt-including by then finance minister Rishi Sunak-following a string of scandals that left the Conservatives sliding in opinion polls against Labour. It was a spectacular fall from grace for a politician who secured a landslide election win in December 2019 and took the UK out of the European Union a month later, before the COVID pandemic struck. Conservative MPs were to vote on the eight candidates who survived an initial cull Tuesday, with the final vote expected around 1600 GMT Wednesday.

Those failing to get 30 votes will be eliminated. A series of votes will be held into next week until there are just two left in the race. Grassroots party members will then be balloted. While Johnson himself says he will stay above the fray, his remaining loyalists have not held back in rubbishing frontrunner Sunak, and have been coalescing behind the right-wing foreign secretary, Liz Truss.

Sunak's camp denied orchestrating a plot to boost the standing of less favoured candidates in the hope of seeing off stronger contenders such as Truss, before the final runoff vote by party members.

### Mordaunt and McCartney

Transport Secretary Grant Shapps, who withdrew from the race to support Sunak, also pushed back at the claims that his candidate had been a "socialist chancellor" for overseeing a massive support package during the pandemic. Sunak has since been stressing the need to balance the books, in contrast to a free-for-all series of tax cuts promised by leadership rivals that has drawn concern from the Bank of England and independent economists. Sunak came top in Tuesday's list of nominations from Tory MPs, ahead of former defence minister Penny Mordaunt, Truss and foreign affairs committee chairman Tom Tugendhat.

Former junior minister Kemi Badenoch, new chancellor Nadhim Zahawi, ex-health secretary Jeremy Hunt and Attorney General Suella Braverman rounded out the eight. Giving her first campaign speech Wednesday, Mordaunt built on the patriotic themes that suffused her launch video—which had to be taken down after complaints from individuals who featured in it without permission. The Royal Navy reservist said she was inspired to a life of service in 1982, aged nine, when she watched a taskforce of warships leaving her home city of Portsmouth to retake the Falkland Islands from Argentina.

"I think our party has lost its sense of self," Mordaunt said, likening the Conservatives to Beatles legend Paul McCartney's set last month at the Glastonbury music festival. "We indulged all those new tunes, but what we really wanted was the good old stuff that we all knew the words to: low tax, small state, personal responsibility," she said. Braverman, an "anti-woke" outsider in the race, denied that the hostile sniping seen so far would damage the Conservatives longer term.—AFP

## Iran: Biden Mideast trip won't bring security to Zionists

TEHRAN: Iran said US President Joe Biden's trip to the Middle East, which starts on Wednesday, will not bring about security for Zionist entity, the Islamic republic's regional arch-enemy.

"If the visits of the American officials to the countries of the region are to strengthen the position of the Zionist regime and to normalise the relations of this regime with some countries, their efforts will not create security for the Zionists in any way," President Ebrahim Raisi said in a statement, referring to Zionist entity.

Biden's Middle East trip will take him to Zionist entity on Wednesday, followed by a direct flight to Saudi Arabia on Friday, amid hopes that the visit will pave the way to establishing relations between the Jewish state and the Gulf kingdom.

Iran has repeatedly criticised the normalisation of ties between Gulf Arab states and Zionist entity, calling it "a stab in the back" to the Palestinians. Raisi on Wednesday emphasised that the Islamic republic is closely monitoring "all of the developments" in the region. "We have repeatedly told those who have brought messages from

the Americans that if the slightest move is made against Iran's territorial integrity, it will be met with our decisive response," he added. Zionist's Prime Minister Yair Lapid had said on Sunday that expanding joint action to counter Tehran would top the agenda during Biden's visit. It came after the White House had said days earlier that the visit would see discussions on enhancing regional air defence collaboration, particularly with regards to countering Tehran-plans Iran denounced as a "threat" to its security.

Iran's foreign ministry spokesman Nasser Kanani told reporters earlier on Wednesday that the creation of regional coalitions by the US will not ensure security for the region. "The policy of making groups and blocs and creating military coalitions, especially under the supervision of a non-regional country, will definitely not contribute to security and stability," he said.

"Security is neither purchasable nor importable. We believe that creating stability and security in the region can only be achieved through the collective cooperation of regional countries, which are the true owners of the region," Kanani added.

Meanwhile, Iran's president said Wednesday his country's demands were "reasonable" during negotiations to restore its 2015 nuclear deal with world powers. "Iran has always acted completely rationally and put on the table reasonable demands," President Ebrahim Raisi said during a cabinet meeting, according to his official website.—AFP

## Belarus journalist given extra 8 years for 'state treason'

MOSCOW: Belarus on Wednesday sentenced a young journalist who covered protests against President Alexander Lukashenko to an additional eight years in prison for "state treason", the channel she worked for said. Katerina Bakhvalova—who uses the pen name Katerina Andreyeva—was already serving a two-year sentence for "violating public order" and was due to be released in September.



Katerina Bakhvalova

The 28-year-old was detained in November 2020 with fellow journalist Daria Chultsova while filming one of the anti-government rallies that swept Belarus that year. "Our colleague Katerina Andreyeva was sentenced to eight years in prison," the Poland-based Belsat TV channel and media said on Telegram.

It said she was transferred from the prison colony where she was held in Gomel, south-eastern Belarus, and brought to a pre-trial detention centre in February. "For 55 days, her relatives did not know the details of the case," Belsat said.

The Viasna rights group said on its website that her family was informed in April that she was given a new "state treason" charge. Viasna considers Bakhvalova to be one of 1,244 political prisoners in the country.

Belarus's exiled opposition leader Svetlana Tikhonovskaya said the sentence was punishment for showing "the truth." "It makes me so angry to see the regime take revenge on those who dare to resist," she said on Twitter.

"She dared to show the truth about the regime's brutality to the world." Lukashenko's regime has orchestrated a brutal crackdown on any pockets of dissent after unprecedented protests swept Belarus in 2020. The Belarus strongman, in power since 1994, relies on neighbouring Moscow for support.

His country had served as a springboard for the Russian army to launch its assault on Ukraine in late February. — AFP