

International

China's leaders recommit to 'unswerving' zero-COVID policy

China is fighting its biggest wave of locally transmitted cases

BEIJING, China: China's leaders said they would not waver from their zero-COVID policy, state media reported Thursday, echoing a vow last week to "unswervingly" stick to the strategy.

China is the last major economy wedded to a policy of extinguishing outbreaks as they emerge, imposing snap lockdowns, mass testing and lengthy quarantines despite the widespread disruption to businesses and international supply chains.



China's biggest car show cancelled

President Xi Jinping presided over a meeting with the Chinese Communist Party's newly appointed top decision-making body, which vowed to "unswervingly implement" strict COVID-19 prevention rules, state broadcaster CCTV reported Thursday.

"The meeting emphasized that it is necessary to... unswervingly implement the strategy of defending

against importing foreign virus cases," CCTV said.

The statement echoed comments by National Health Commission spokesperson Mi Feng on Saturday that China would "unswervingly" stick to zero-COVID.

China is fighting its biggest wave of locally transmitted cases in six months, with nearly 9,000 infections reported Thursday. During the meeting, party leaders urged local officials not to "adopt a one-size-fits-all" strategy for pandemic prevention. Zero-COVID has prompted rare public outrage from residents over food shortages and delayed emergency medical care for those under lockdown. Last week, authorities issued a rare apology after a three-year-old boy died of carbon monoxide poisoning when medical care was delayed because of a lockdown.

Ninety-five new infections were reported Thursday in Beijing, where schools have been closed in the downtown district of Chaoyang since Monday. Some companies have asked staff to work from home temporarily.

Zero-COVID has also left businesses reeling from sudden disruptions and consumers reluctant to spend.

Organisers of China's biggest car show said Thursday that this year's event has been cancelled due to Beijing's surge in cases. The biennial Beijing auto show attracts both international and domestic carmakers and is often used as a launchpad for new products.

"Facing severe challenges for the country's epidemic prevention and control, (we) have decided not to hold



BEIJING: People wait in line to be tested for COVID-19 at a nucleic acid testing station in Beijing on November 10, 2022. — AFP

the auto show in 2022," organiser Auto China said in a post on its official WeChat account.

"The specific date for the exhibition will be announced separately when available," it said. The trade show was first scheduled for April before being

postponed until further notice when a Covid outbreak hit the Chinese capital. China is the world's largest automobile market but sales growth has slowed in recent months as COVID restrictions and fears over a cooling economy have dampened demand. — AFP

Indonesia blames plane crash on mechanical issues

JAKARTA: Indonesian investigators on Thursday blamed mechanical problems and pilot complacency for a deadly plane crash last year that killed all 62 passengers and crew. The Sriwijaya Air Boeing 737-500 nosedived 3,000 metres (10,000 feet) into waters off the capital Jakarta just minutes after takeoff on January 9, 2021. In its final report, Indonesia's National Transportation Safety Committee (KNKT) pointed to several factors that contributed to the crash, starting with mechanical issues. The twin-engine airliner's autothrottle system suffered a malfunction, which caused it to tilt off course, KNKT said in a press release.

The 26-year-old jet ended up sharply deviating from its intended flight path just before its deadly plunge. Investigators said complacency may have resulted "in less monitoring" by the pilots, meaning the course change went unnoticed and they were not able to act quickly enough.

Their report further blamed a lack of regulation and official guidance for the lack of skill and knowledge in pilots to react to such situations. Crews on previous flights had described the jet's throttle system as "unserviceable" and that it had been repaired several



JAKARTA: Captain Nurcahyo Utomo, from the National Transportation Safety Committee, delivers a report on investigation of the Sriwijaya Air plane that crashed during a press conference in Jakarta on November 10, 2022. — AFP

times before its fatal final flight, according to a preliminary report after the crash.

Indonesia is a vast archipelago with a poor air safety record despite relying heavily on air transport to connect its thousands of islands. The country has suffered three major commercial plane crashes since 2014. In October 2018, 189 people were killed when a Lion Air Boeing 737 MAX plunged into the sea.

That accident — and another in Ethiopia — led to the worldwide grounding of the 737 MAX model over a faulty anti-stall system. And in 2014, an AirAsia A320 jet crashed into the Java Sea during bad weather, killing all 162 people on board. — AFP

Nicole weakens to Tropical Storm

WASHINGTON: Tropical Storm Nicole slowed after making landfall in the US state of Florida, meteorologists said Thursday, with high winds raising concerns that a long-delayed NASA rocket launch could be disrupted. The storm, a rare occurrence this late in the year, sparked mandatory evacuation orders just weeks after Florida was battered by Hurricane Ian. But just an hour after Nicole made landfall as a Category 1 hurricane it was downgraded to a Tropical Storm, the US-based National Hurricane Center (NHC) said in a statement Thursday.

The NHC said Nicole was packing sustained maximum winds of up to 70 miles (110 kilometers) per hour and heading towards Georgia and South Carolina, which would also be affected. The storm could also possibly hit Ohio, Pennsylvania and New York later in the week, it said.

Nicole passed over the Bahamas on Wednesday, with the level of destruction not immediately clear. A tropical storm warning was issued for Florida's eastern coast from the city of Boca Raton to the boundary between Flagler and Volusia counties, the NHC said.

"Strong winds, dangerous storm surge and waves, and heavy rains continue over a large area," it said. Forty-five of the state's 67 counties were under a state of emergency, Governor Ron DeSantis said, while four counties were under mandatory evacuation orders, according to the state's Division of Emergency Management.

More than 100,000 customers in the affected areas were without electricity, according to PowerOutage.us. In preparation for the storm's impact, DeSantis said 16,000 people had been recruited to respond to power outages and 600 national guardsmen had been activated. — AFP

red lines are," Biden told a news conference following US midterm elections. Biden said he sought to know "what he believes to be in the critical national interests of China, what I know to be the critical interests of the United States, and to determine whether or not they conflict with one another."

If there are conflicts, Biden said he hoped to work together on "how to work it out." Biden and Xi have spoken virtually as presidents but have not met in person, with the Chinese leader until recently putting off international travel due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Xi heads to the Indonesian resort island fresh from securing a historic third term from his Communist Party, while Biden is flying out following a surprisingly strong showing by his Democrats in midterm elections.

The two leaders know each other unusually well for two presidents, with Biden in 2011 traveling to China to spend time with Xi when they were both vice presi-

Wagner 'atrocities' give ammunition to Mali jihadists

DAKAR: Since the withdrawal of the French army from Mali, Russia's Wagner Group has replaced it as a target of jihadist propaganda, experts say, with extremists making hay with claims that its mercenaries have committed atrocities against civilians. Having been pushed towards the exit by the leaders of Mali's 2020 coup, France finally withdrew in August this year more than nine years after its military intervened to stop a jihadist takeover of the troubled Sahel nation.

The colonels in charge in Bamako have been increasingly turning to Russia, and particularly to Wagner's paramilitaries, according to Western sources. Bamako denies this, acknowledging only the support of Russian military "instructors".

But it is Wagner that the Al-Qaeda-linked group Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, or JNIM, has been targeting in the information war. "Wagner's operations are mainly located in central Mali and mainly target the Fulani community, of which JNIM presents itself as the protector," said Henri Nsaibia, a senior researcher at ACLED, which specialises in the collection of conflict-related data.

"There have been many clashes between the JNIM and the Malian armed forces and Wagner, who are operating jointly," Nsaibia said. "In many ways Wagner has replaced France as the foreign force in the conflict, even if the jihadists don't refer to Wagner as 'crusaders' like they did to the French, but as a 'criminal militia' of mercenaries." Wagner emerged in 2014 during the first war in Ukraine and is suspected by the West of doing the Kremlin's dirty work in conflicts including Syria and the Central African Republic — a charge Russia has always denied.

'Ethnic war'

JNIM boasts of having caught the "Malian army, Wagner's mercenaries and pro-government militias in an ethnic war against Muslims" in an ambush in the

central Bandiagara region late last month. They also claim to have given Fulani herders back the animals that government forces had taken from them.

For years "jihadist groups have presented themselves as the defenders of local populations from the army and its proxies, which according to them, do nothing but kill civilians," said Boubacar Haidara, a researcher at the Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies.

The use of this "alibi to justify their violence" has been made easier by the "arrival of Russian elements", he argued, at the same time as the "toll on civilians has become more and more deadly".

While the majority of the 860 civilians killed in Mali in the first six months of the year were the victims of jihadists, some 344 — or 40 percent — were killed in army operations, the United Nations said. "The people judge by the atrocities committed on civilians," said Binla Sidibe Gascon, of monitoring group Kisa, which stands up for Fulani communities. "Since Wagner arrived, and particularly after what happened in Moura, we are witnessing an exponential rise in the number of civilian victims."

Massacre

Human Rights Watch (HRW) accused Malian soldiers of massacring some 300 civilians in Moura in March with the help of foreign fighters, who witnesses said were Russian. The Malian army denies those killed were civilian, saying it "neutralised" more than 200 jihadists. JNIM's main leader in the region, the Fulani preacher Amadou Koufa, accused Wagner and the Malian army of the bloodbath in a rare video in June, claiming that only "around 30" of his fighters were killed, while the rest of the dead were "innocents".

"What is going to wake people up," said Sidibe Gascon, is that despite "all these atrocities against civilians, no territory is being retaken and sadly the situation is getting worse, with more displaced people, schools closed and a humanitarian crisis." However, Haidara said much of the Malian public "do not believe that civilians are being killed", and are receptive to the military's claims that talk of massacres are "French calumnies to denigrate the Malian forces when they are 'doing more than Barkhane (the French military operation) was able to do in nine years.'" — AFP



HOMBORI, Mali: File photo taken on March 27, 2019, a French soldier of the Barkhane Force operation standing at a FAM (Malian Armed Forces) base with the Mount Hombori in the background before the start of the French Barkhane Force operation in Mali's Gourma region. — AFP

Biden seeks to gauge US, China 'red lines' with Xi

WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden said Wednesday he would ask Chinese President Xi Jinping about his "red lines" to reduce the potential for conflict after soaring tensions on Taiwan when they gather next week in Bali. A day before flying to Asia, Biden indirectly confirmed plans to meet Xi on the sidelines of the Group of 20 summit in what would be their first encounter since they became presidents of the world's two largest economies. "What I want to do with him when we talk is lay out what kind of what each of our

dents. Eleven years later, tension has risen sharply over Taiwan with the Biden administration warning that China has stepped up its timeline to seize the self-governing democracy that it claims as part of its territory.

Biden support on Taiwan

Biden on three occasions has indicated that he is ready to commit the US military to defend Taiwan, a break with longstanding policy that was walked back each time by the White House. Biden insisted Wednesday there was no change in the historic US stance of strategic ambiguity on whether Washington would use force in the event of a Chinese invasion.

"The Taiwan doctrine has not changed at all from the very beginning," Biden said, adding that he would discuss Taiwan but also trade and China's relationship with other countries. US concerns about Taiwan have been thrown into stark relief by Russia's February 24 invasion

of Ukraine, an operation that had until recently been seen as a remote possibility. Biden bluntly repeated US assessments that China has hesitated at supporting Russia materially, despite President Vladimir Putin's visit to Beijing to meet Xi before the invasion. "I don't think there's a lot of respect that China has for Russia or for Putin," Biden said. "I don't think they look at that as a particular alliance. Matter of fact, they've been sort of keeping their distance a little bit." Biden, like his predecessor Donald Trump, has identified China as the premier global competitor of the United States and promised to reorient US policy around the challenge.

But the Biden administration has also promised to work with China on common interests such as climate change. US climate envoy John Kerry briefly met his Chinese counterpart Xie Zhenhua at the COP27 climate summit in Egypt, marking a further thaw in tensions. — AFP