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'KYIV STANDS,' DECLARES BIDEN AS HE MAKES A SURPRISE VISIT TO UKRAINE

Washington says Moscow was notified of the U.S. President's visit to Kyiv shortly before his departure 'for deconfliction'



United front: Joe Biden walks with Volodymyr Zelensky at the St. Michael's Golden-Domed Cathedral in Kyiv on Monday. AFP

U.S. President Joe Biden paid an unannounced visit to Ukraine on Monday to meet with President Volodymyr Zelensky in a defiant display of Western solidarity with a country still fighting what he called "a brutal and unjust war" days before the one-year anniversary of Russia's invasion. The White House would not go into specifics, but national security adviser Jake Sullivan said that it notified Moscow of Mr. Biden's visit to Kyiv shortly before his departure from Washington "for deconfliction purposes" in an effort to avoid any miscalculation that could bring the two nuclear-armed nations into direct conflict.

"One year later, Kyiv stands," Mr. Biden declared after meeting Mr. Zelensky. "And Ukraine stands. Democracy stands. The Americans stand with you, and the world stands with you."

Mr. Biden spent more than five hours in the Ukrainian

capital, consulting with Mr. Zelensky on the next steps, honouring the country's fallen soldiers and seeing U.S. embassy staff in the besieged country. the International Civil Aviation Covenant."

"China deplores it and strongly protests it," he said. "It is the U.S. who is in fact the number one country in terms of surveillance, whose high-altitude balloons illegally flew over China multiple times."

'Fix the damage'

Warning of the consequences to relations, Mr. Wang said the U.S. "needs to...demonstrate sincerity, and acknowledge and resolve the damage its abuse of force has

done to China-U.S. relations." "If the U.S. side continues to fuss over, dramatise and escalate the unintended and isolated incident, it should not expect the Chinese side to flinch. The U.S. side should be prepared to bear all consequence arising from an escalation," he warned.

Mr. Blinken said the U.S. "will compete and will unapologetically stand up for our values and interests, but that we do not want conflict with the PRC and are not looking for a new Cold War." Mr. Wang, for his part, reminded the U.S. of its commitments on the Taiwan issue calling for it to "follow through on its statement of 'not supporting Taiwan independence'".

Both sides also differed on the Ukraine crisis, and Mr. Blinken had "warned about the consequences if China provides material support to Russia or assistance with systemic sanctions evasion." Mr. Wang rejected the warning, saying China "does not accept the U.S.'s finger-pointing or even coercion targeting China-Russia relations."

EPFO LISTS NORMS FOR OPTING HIGHER PENSION

After several days of discussions, the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) issued a circular on Monday to its regional offices with a set of instructions to implement the November 4 Supreme Court verdict on higher provident fund (PF) pension.

It lists all the procedures and required documents for existing employees and for those who retired after September 1, 2014 to claim higher pension based on actual salary beyond the prescribed ceiling in the Employees' Pension Scheme (EPS) of 1995.

Employees can submit the joint option with the employers using the members' section of the EPFO website, which will be made available "soon".

While employers' organisations welcomed the circular, trade unions said it was delayed beyond the date suggested by the top court and it will cause further inconvenience for pensioners as the deadline set to submit joint options will end on March 3.

Regional PF Commissioner (Pension) Aprajita Jaggi said in the circular that employees who did not exercise joint option as per paragraph 11(3) of the EPS "would be entitled to exercise joint option". The employees and pensioners who had contributed to the EPS and did not exercise joint option for higher pension on actual salary prior to

September 1, 2014 can now apply for enhanced pension. The employees and pensioners should give joint consent with the employer to the EPFO for adjustment from Provident Fund to Pension Fund and for any re-deposit to the fund.

"In case of transfer of funds from exempted provident fund trust to pension fund of EPFO, an undertaking of the trustee shall be submitted. The undertaking shall be to the effect that due contribution along with interest up to the date of payment, will be deposited within the specified period," she said.

"In case of employees of un-exempted establishments, refund of requisite employer's share of contribution, the same shall be deposited with interest at the rate declared under Para 60 of the EPF Scheme, 1952, till the date of actual refund," the circular said and added that the method of deposit and that of computation of pension will follow through subsequent circular.

Member of the Central Board of Trustees representing employers K.E. Raghunathan said the circular had simplified the process with clarity for seeking pension on higher wages. "This has put at rest all the other speculative expectations. We must appreciate the complexity and financial implications," he said.

REFORM RELUCTANCE

The sense of urgency to fix the GST regime's flaws seems to have ebbed

Meeting in person after nearly eight months, the GST Council last Saturday reached a broad consensus on establishing GST Appellate Tribunals to resolve disputes under the tax regime launched in July 2017. After some fine print changes in consultations with States, the Finance Ministry hopes to include the legislative backing for the tribunals in the Finance Bill likely to be passed next month. This raises hopes of quicker disposal of GST disagreements that are adding to courts' caseloads, but the reason for delaying this vital cog of the 'One Nation, One Tax' promise is difficult to fathom. A few rate changes that could make, among other things, pencil sharpeners a tad cheaper, and lower penal charges for delayed filings by smaller taxpayers also got the Council's nod. The implications of some other moves, like a new system for evasion-prone sectors such as gutkha, will depend on the minutiae in their notifications. A much-deferred review of the GST on online gaming and casinos remains stuck. The stated reason for not taking it up this time was that the chief of the ministerial group entrusted with the issue had Assembly poll work. With nine Assembly elections scheduled this year, that does not augur well for the Council's ability to resolve prickly issues faster this year.

Of greater concern is the stalling of the rationalisation

of the complex GST rate structure with multiple slabs, and critical inputs left out. A Group of Ministers (GoM) was tasked, in late 2021, to propose a fix for anomalies in GST levies such as inverted duty structures, and propose revised rates with fewer slabs. The Council was informed that GST was still not delivering enough revenues — with the aggregate tax rate close to 12% rather than the 15.5% revenue-neutral rate envisaged originally, "knowingly or unknowingly" due to rate cuts on some items between 2017 and 2021. While some anomalies flagged by the GoM were fixed last June, the Centre had signalled the rates' rejig would be deferred as inflation had surged and any revision would mean higher taxes for some items. The report on rate reforms is still awaited, inflation remains a headache and the onset of an electoral season culminating with the Lok Sabha election in 2024, means the same dithering logic holds true. Tighter compliance and higher prices have also bolstered average GST revenues, perhaps diluting the urgency to fix the unwieldy tax tangle. But for taxpayers, who continue to pay 28% GST on as essential an item as cement — whether it is used to build a roof over one's head or construct an expressway — a truly good and simple tax system will now likely have to wait till at least 2025.

SLOW PROGRESS TO CREATING A SAFE WORKPLACE FOR WOMEN

R.K. Vij is a former Special Director General of Police of Chhattisgarh

The recent case of allegations of sexual harassment that some of India's sportswomen (wrestling) are said to have faced have shocked us. Those affected had to sit in protest in the capital to make themselves heard. This shows that any internal complaints committee (if there is one) does not function. Or, the wrestlers were not aware about it. The Vishaka guidelines on reporting harassment are meant to be followed by government and private institutions equally. In view of the sensitivity of the issue, the Union Sports Minister constituted an 'oversight committee' headed by a lady Olympic medal holder to investigate the charges levelled against the president of the Wrestling Federation of India.

Earlier, in February 2021, a leading woman journalist celebrated her victory — not because the accused person who has harassed her sexually was convicted, but because she was acquitted of accusations of defamation that have been levelled against her by the accused. The 'truth' of victimisation prevailed and it was held that a woman cannot be punished for raising her voice against abuse. She had raised her voice against her employer and a powerful politician. Though a specific offence relating to 'sexual harassment' (under Section 354-A) was inserted in the Indian Penal Code (IPC) in 2013, the allegations largely fell under Section 509 (i.e., to insult the modesty of a woman) of the IPC. The victim chose not to report the matter to the police, and there was no internal mechanism in place for the redress of complaints of sexual harassment as the Vishaka guidelines were framed by the Supreme Court of India in 1997. But this did not give the employer any liberty to violate the fundamental rights of a woman at the workplace.

Structural violence, data on workforce

Violence, in the form of sexual harassment at the workplace, is both direct and structural. While an enabling environment for reporting direct violence has shown a gradual improvement, indirect violence remains poorly addressed because it is embedded deep in our social and economic structures. It is more visible in the employment imbalance prevalent between men and women, in the organised and unorganised sectors. With more men at the workplace, they feel entitled and empowered to take undue advantage of the historical fact that the society is still patriarchal and women are not only in a minority but also occupy a few of the higher positions. The numbers matter when it comes to power emanating from the majority. One musters courage to voice one's grievance when there are sufficient numbers in support of the affected person. Also, much would depend on the tooth-to-tail ratio of any organisation.

When the number of women in leadership positions are not enough to generate confidence in subordinates, women in lower positions feel reluctant to air their grievances.

The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) annual report available for 2020-21 shows that though the participation of women in the total labour force grew, i.e., Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) has gradually increased from 17.5% in 2017-18 to 25.1% in 2020-21, and the Worker Population Ratio (WPR) from 16.5% in 2017-18 to 24.2% in 2020-21, it is still much less when compared to men. The LFPR and WPR data published in the latest Quarterly Bulletin (April-June 2022) are not encouraging either. While LFPR is defined as the percentage of persons in the labour force among the persons in population (i.e., both employed and unemployed or seeking employment), WPR is the percentage of persons employed among the persons in population. Start early, and at home

The absence of an enabling and safe working environment is one of the factors for the poor participation of women in the labour force. It is generally believed that most women do not complain of sexual harassment and the current redress mechanism is either non-existent or ineffective. They are more vulnerable to exploitation by their employer as they can be easily threatened with their job continuity for indecent favours.

Unless the mindset of treating men and women as equals is developed at an early stage of character formation during childhood, the stereotyped power relation between the two would be difficult to change later.

It would not be out of context to mention here a theory of criminology known as 'nature versus nurture'. It says that both genetics and the environment affect an individual's development. While genes may decide certain features of one's personality at birth, it is social conditioning and the environment of the family and early schooling which matter the most during the growth of children. Unless both parents respect each other and treat their girl and boy child on a par in all respects, they grow up learning this inequality as a normal phenomenon, which may even lead to the development of criminal tendencies in men. Therefore, the beginning has to be made at home.

Fixing goals

Similarly, providing a safe work environment is the responsibility of the employer. The employer needs to ensure that the working environment is safe and women friendly. However, it has been observed that whenever allegations of sexual

harassment are of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal), Act, 2013, the accused either resorts to multiple attempts at litigation to stall the due process or attempts to bring disrepute to the victim on flimsy grounds. The situation becomes more complex when the accused himself is at the helm of affairs, as in the examples given above.

Therefore, it is essential to fix goals to improve the workplace environment for women. The short-term goals may include providing the requisite women-friendly infrastructure, the constitution of internal complaint committees, and the

spreading of awareness about the law and procedure of grievance redress. Medium-term goals may include the increase of female participation in the labour force, improvement of tooth-to-tail ratio, and providing incentives to prevent drop-outs such as paid maternity leave. However, in the long-run, it is essential to address the deep-rooted structural and cultural violence which puts women in a disadvantageous position. Unless society as a whole works incessantly to bring about the required changes in the existing socio-cultural and economic structures to eliminate indirect violence, root and branch, the status quo may not change.

MORE SABRE-RATTLING, MORE ISOLATION: MILITARISATION OF THE SOUTH CHINA SEA



Increasing tensions: This photo provided by the Philippine Coast Guard shows a green military-grade laser light from a Chinese coast guard ship in the disputed South China Sea on February 6. AP

The South China Sea has always been a transit point for trade since early medieval times, contains abundantly rich fisheries, and is a repository of mineral deposits and hydrocarbon reserves. Therefore, current Chinese muscularity in the SCS is leading to a growing chorus of protest

JAYANT PRASAD

Amid overlapping sovereign claims in the South China Sea, the Philippines and the U.S. are currently discussing conducting joint coast guard patrols in the strategic waterway. In this article dated July 8, 2020, former diplomat Jayant Prasad details China's aggression in the South China Sea and how the region has been militarily equipping itself against China.

The Philippines invoked the dispute settlement mechanism of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 2013 to test the legality of China's 'nine-dash line' regarding the disputed Spratlys. In response, the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) at The Hague decreed in its July 12, 2016 judgment that the line had "no legal basis." China dismissed the judgment as "null and void." The South China Sea (SCS) is important not just to its littoral countries. It has been a transit point for trade since early medieval times, contains abundantly rich fisheries, and is a repository of mineral deposits and hydrocarbon reserves.

The PCA verdict

The PCA award undermined the Chinese claim. It held that none of the features of the Spratlys qualified them as islands, and there was no legal basis for China to claim historic rights and to the resources within the 'nine-dash line'. The UNCLOS provides that islands must sustain habitation and the capacity for non-extractive economic activity. Reefs and shoals that are unable to do so are considered low-tide elevations

The award implied that China violated the Philippines Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). It noted that China had aggravated the situation by undertaking land reclamation and construction, and had harmed the environment and violated its obligation to preserve the ecosystem. China dismissed the award as "a political farce under the pretext of law."

Given the power equations, the Philippines did not press for enforcement of the award and acquiesced in the status quo. Not one country challenged China, which agreed to settle disputes bilaterally, and to continue work on a Code of Conduct with countries of the ASEAN.

Given that their economic ties with China are deepening, it may appear that the ASEAN countries are bandwagoning with China. In reality, there is growing discontent. While avoiding military confrontation with China, they are seeking political insurance, strengthening their navies, and deepening their military relationships with the United States.

Vietnam has added six Kilo-class, Russian-origin submarines to its navy. France, Germany and the Netherlands, respectively, have supplied Formidable-class stealth ships to Singapore, patrol boats to Brunei Darussalam, and corvettes to Indonesia. Japan is partially funding the upgradation of the Indonesian coast guard. Indonesia and the Philippines are in early stages of exploring procurement of the BrahMos missile from India. The other ASEAN countries that have shown interest are Thailand and Vietnam.

Growing Chinese muscularity in the SCS is visible in the increased patrolling and live-fire exercising by Chinese naval vessels; ramming and sinking of fishing vessels of other claimant countries; renaming of SCS features; and building of runways, bunkers, and habitation for possible long-term stationing of personnel on the atolls claimed by China.

Chinese exploration and drilling vessels compete aggressively with those of other littoral countries in the disputed waters. Petronas has been prospecting for oil in the Malaysian EEZ. A Chinese spokesperson claimed in early June that its own survey vessel in the same area was conducting “normal activities in waters under Chinese jurisdiction.”

The festering regional resentment against China resulted in the unmuting of the ASEAN response to the growing Chinese footprint in the SCS at its 36th Summit on June 26, 2020.

China might have overreached by showing its aggressive hand prematurely. There is a growing chorus of protest against China. Having Vietnam, Japan and the U.S. riled up about its actions is nothing new for China. The Philippines and the ASEAN beginning to protest is new, even if their criticism is restrained. This does China little credit, and points to its growing isolation.

Indonesia protested to China about Chinese vessels trespassing into its waters close to the Nantua islands, towards the south of the SCS. The Philippines protested to China earlier this year about violations of Filipino sovereignty in the West Philippine Sea. It also wrote to the UN Secretary General (UNSG) in March disputing China’s claim of “historic rights in the South China Sea.” Two months later, Indonesia too wrote to the UNSG on this issue. It expressed support for compliance with international law, particularly the UNCLOS, as also for the PCA’s 2016 ruling.

President Rodrigo Duterte said he had not followed up on the PCA judgment because the Philippines could not afford to fight China. Yet, when a Chinese firm bid to develop the Subic Bay, this was disallowed on the grounds that the use of archipelagic waters was exclusively reserved for Filipinos and that foreign investment regulations prohibited foreign equity for the utilisation of marine resources in archipelagic waters. Another recent decision, to extend the Visiting Forces Agreement with the U.S. for six months “in light of political and other developments in the region,” as expressed by the Philippines Foreign Secretary, is a strategic setback for China. Only this June, the Philippines commissioned a

beaching ramp on the Pag-Asa Island. A Filipino C-130 landed on its runway, which is being repaired. The Philippines is about to induct its first missile-capable frigate, built in South Korea, into its navy.

A complicating factor for China is Russia’s growing military and economic equities in the SCS. Russia and Vietnam have a defence cooperation relationship, which they are committed to strengthening. China has objected to Rosneft Vietnam BV prospecting within the Chinese defined ‘nine-dash line.’ Rosneft has also been invited by the Philippines to conduct oil prospecting in its EEZ.

India’s relevant options

From India’s perspective, foreign and security policy in its larger neighbourhood covers the entire expanse of the Asia-Pacific and extends to the Persian Gulf and West Asia. India straddles, and is the fulcrum of, the region between the Suez and Shanghai, between West and East Asia, and between the Mediterranean and the SCS. The SCS carries merchandise to and from India. It follows that India has a stake in the SCS, just as China has in the Indian Ocean.

India must continue to actively pursue its defence diplomacy outreach in the Indo-Pacific region: increase military training and conduct exercises and exchanges at a higher level of complexity, extend Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief activities, share patrolling of the Malacca Strait with the littoral countries, etc. The Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships that India has concluded with Australia, Japan, Indonesia, the U.S., and Vietnam could be extended to Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore.

India must also buttress the military capacity of the tri-service Andaman and Nicobar Command. According to one of its early Commanders-in-Chief, Lt. Gen. Aditya Singh, the manner in which the 368 islands, have been neglected “can only be termed as criminal.” These have immense geo-strategic value, as they overlook Asia’s maritime strategic lifeline and the world’s most important global sea lane. In this time of turbulence, India cannot afford to continue undervaluing one of its biggest assets.

DHANKHAR TELLS PANEL TO PROBE ‘DISORDERLY CONDUCT’ OF 12 MPs

On a breach of privilege notice moved by a few members against 12 Opposition MPs for “disorderly conduct” which forced multiple adjournments, Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar on Monday directed the Privileges Committee of the Upper House to investigate the complaints and submit a report.

The Rajya Sabha Secretariat, in a bulletin, listed out the names of Congress MPs Syed Nasir Hussain, Shaktisinh Gohil, Imran Pratapgarhi, L Hanumanthiah, Kumar Ketkar Jebi Mather, Ranjeet Ranjan, Phulo Devi Netam and Naranbhai J. Rathwa. AAP MPs Sanjay Singh, Sandeep Kumar Pathak and Sushil Kumar Gupta have also been named. As per the bulletin, the members, “in

violation of rules and etiquette” of the Rajya Sabha by repeatedly entering the well of the council, shouting slogans, persistently and wilfully obstructing the proceedings of the council, had been compelling the Chair to repeatedly adjourn the sitting.

In another bulletin, the Secretariat stated that Mr. Sanjay Singh’s conduct will also be investigated for “repeated submission of identical notices under Rule 267”. Rule 267 is used by the members to raise issues of national importance suspending the business of the day. Several Opposition members citing this rule had repeatedly demanded a debate on the Adani issue, but Mr. Dhankhar rejected their demands.

INDIA AND ITALY EYE DEFENCE PACT DURING MELONI VISIT



Giorgia Meloni

India and Italy are expected to put nearly a decade of tensions over the arrest of Italian marines and other issues firmly behind them with discussions about a bilateral defence cooperation that is likely to be announced during Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's visit to India.

Ms. Meloni, the far-right Italian leader who is travelling to Delhi as chief guest of the Raisina Dialogue conference on March 2, will meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi, three months after they met on the sidelines of the G-20 conference in Bali.

"A general agreement on bilateral cooperation in the defence sector [is being discussed]," a diplomatic source confirmed to The Hindu, adding that if talks do not conclude during Ms. Meloni's visit in March, the agreement will be ready for signing during her next visit to India in September for the G-20 summit. Last week, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh held talks with Italian

State Secretary for Defence Matteo Peregò Di Cernago in Bengaluru on the sidelines of the Aero India show, the first such visit in several years.

Indo-Pacific strategy

Ms. Meloni will be the third Italian Prime Minister to visit India in the past decade after Paolo Gentiloni in 2017 and Giuseppe Conte in 2018, but the defence agreement, which is also tied closely to Italy's Indo-Pacific strategy, will be a first.

Significantly, during 2012-2015, when Italy-India ties nosedived over the arrest of two Italian marines for the killing of Kerala fishermen off the Indian coast, Ms. Meloni and her party, Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy), had taken a hard line, calling for the Indian Ambassador to be expelled over the issue. In 2015, Italy also vetoed India's application to join the exclusive club of countries in the Missile Technology Control Regime, and lobbied for India to be designated a human rights violator at the European Parliament.

Subsequently, the Modi government decided to send the marines back to Italy, and the case was resolved mutually at the Permanent Court of Arbitration.

Defence cooperation

In addition, the controversy surrounding the Agusta Westland VVIP helicopter deal disrupted bilateral relations as well as defence cooperation for several years. Even so, Italy remained involved in India's defence industry in some ways.

For instance, Fincantieri of Italy is the know-how provider for technology upgrade and capability enhancement for India's first indigenous aircraft carrier project, INS Vikrant, which was commissioned last September.

In November 2021, days after Mr. Modi's meeting with then Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi on the sidelines of the G-20 meeting in Rome, the Defence Ministry decided to lift the ban on Italian defence company Leonardo involved in the VVIP helicopter deal.

The Indian Navy's French-origin Scorpene-class submarines are still without 'heavy-weight torpedoes' after Leonardo was blacklisted. India and Italy are also engaged in multilateral fora in the Indian Ocean Region and Indo-Pacific.

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RANIL GOVT. FACES MOUNTING PRESSURE FOR 'ATTEMPT TO POSTPONE' LOCAL POLLS

Ranil Wickremesinghe

Sri Lanka's President Ranil Wickremesinghe is facing mounting pressure from the political Opposition and civil society over his government's apparent attempts to postpone local government polls, scheduled in early March, citing the lack of funds.

Earlier this year, the island nation's Election Commission announced that the local body elections will be held on March 9, 2023, giving citizens an opportunity to exercise their franchise for the first time since mass protests booted out the former Rajapaksa regime during last year's unprecedented economic crisis.

However, Mr. Wickremesinghe — elected to the country's top office in July 2022, through a parliamentary vote with legislators from the Rajapaksa's party backing him — recently indicated in a public address that the country would be able to go to polls next year, following its economic recovery.

Senior officials from the Finance Ministry and Treasury maintain that the country lacks the finances to hold polls that are estimated to cost LKR 10 billion. While Sri Lanka's Supreme Court is scheduled to hear a case on the issue later this week, the uncertainty ahead of the possible postponement of polls has sparked sharp criticism from Mr. Wickremesinghe's political rivals and members of civil society.

On Monday, a magistrate court in Colombo issued an order preventing the main Opposition party Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB or United People's Force) MPs from holding a protest demanding the conduct of the scheduled polls. The leftist JVP-led National People's Power, also in Opposition, has threatened legal action and protests, should elections be put off.

'Attack on democracy'

The Bar Association of Sri Lanka [BASL], a professional body of lawyers, noted that several decisions taken by the government in recent weeks, "purportedly aimed at managing public funds", are effectively aimed at preventing the Election Commission from holding polls. Following a recent circular from the Ministry of Finance, which is also helmed by President Wickremesinghe, limiting disbursement of funds to "essential services", the Treasury Secretary informed the Election Commission of the difficulty in mobilising necessary funds to hold elections. The Government Printer, too, informed the Commission that it was unable to print ballot papers without the required funds. A recent poll on the 'Mood of the nation' conducted by



Colombo-based Verité Research showed that the Wickremesinghe government continued to have a poor 10% approval rating among the public.

Prominent Sri Lankan scholars and activists said the "mismanagement of the political front by undermining the democratic process can only deepen political instability" and in turn, "adversely impact" the country's economic recovery.

"Holding the local government elections and allowing the citizen's protests will even function as a crucial pressure valve, enabling the people of Sri Lanka to peacefully release their anger and outrage caused by the mounting economic hardships," the academicians and rights defenders observed in a recent joint statement.

BIDEN VISITS KYIV, PLEDGES MORE MILITARY ASSISTANCE

U.S. President Joe Biden on Monday made a trip to Kyiv organised in strict secrecy, promising \$500 million in fresh arms deliveries and "unwavering" American support ahead of the first anniversary of Russia's invasion.

Air raid sirens rang out across the capital at one point as Mr. Biden walked alongside Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky during what was the U.S. President's first visit to the country since Russian troops invaded on February 24, 2022. "One year later, Kyiv stands. And Ukraine stands. Democracy stands," Mr. Biden said, speaking alongside Mr. Zelensky at the Ukrainian President's official residence, Mariinsky Palace.

INDIA IS 'FIRST RESPONDER' DURING NATURAL DISASTERS: PM

India has emerged as the "first responder" to countries hit by natural disasters in "any part of the world", Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Monday. Mr. Modi congratulated the 99-member self-contained Indian team that returned from quake-hit Turkey where it operated a fully-equipped Field Hospital in Iskenderun, Hatay and treated 4,000 patients. The country had also dispatched aircraft carrying relief material and medicines to Syria under the move officially named as "Operation Dost".

ISRAELIS PERSIST WITH THEIR PROTESTS AS NETANYAHU ADVANCES JUDICIAL CHANGES



'Just' cause: Israelis demonstrate against the new judicial plan outside the Knesset in Jerusalem on Monday. REUTERS

Israel's government on Monday was pressing ahead with a contentious plan to overhaul the country's legal system, despite mass protests.

Thousands of demonstrators gathered outside Israel's Parliament, or Knesset, for a second straight week to rally against the plan as lawmakers prepared to hold an initial vote.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his allies say the plan is meant to fix a system that has given the courts and government "We are fighting for our children's future, for our country's

future," Opposition leader Yair Lapid said.

Monday's vote on part of the legislation is just the first of three readings required for parliamentary approval. While that process is expected to take months, the vote is a sign of the coalition's determination to barrel ahead. Legal advisers too much say in how legislation is crafted and decisions are made. Critics say it will concentrate power in the hands of the Prime Minister. They also say that Mr. Netanyahu, who is on trial for a series of corruption charges, has a conflict of interest.

WILL CONTINUE EFFORTS TO CURB INFLATION: FM

The government and the RBI are taking steps to control inflation, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said on Monday. Among other moves, the government has increased the import of edible oil as required to rein in inflation and provided free grains to the poor since the COVID-19 pandemic, and would "continuously monitor prices," Ms. Sitharaman said at a post-budget interaction in Jaipur.

Retail inflation rate rose above the Reserve Bank of India's upper tolerance band for the first time in three months to 6.52% in January, said. As prices rose for food products such as cereals and

wheat. RBI targets to keep inflation between 2%-6%.

The RBI will take necessary steps to manage inflation within "expected limits," she Economists have said soaring prices of cereals were a concern even though the January inflation data may have overstated the extent of the increase. Unlike some countries that calculate CPI-based inflation using a weighted average of a segment of the population that pays market price and those who don't, India does not do that, said Chief Economic Adviser V. Anantha Nageswaran.

GOVT. WARNS HZL ON \$2.98 BN BUYOUT OF VEDANTA'S OVERSEAS ZINC ASSETS

Mines Ministry opposes 'related party transaction', says will explore all available legal avenues and urges Hindustan Zinc to explore 'cashless' acquisition; former state-owned firm says board proposal still needs shareholders' approval as per norms

The Centre has reiterated its opposition to Hindustan Zinc Ltd.'s move to buy its parent Vedanta's overseas zinc assets for almost \$3 billion, and warned the erstwhile state-owned company it will explore all legal avenues against the proposed transaction.

In a missive to the HZL company secretary on February 17, the Ministry of Mines said the government's dissent was already recorded by its three representatives at its January 19 board meeting, following which the management announced the board's nod for the buyout proposal. The government has a residual stake of 29.5% in HZL and has plans to divest this stake over time.

"The proposed resolutions which envisage the acquisition of THL Zinc (a Vedanta company) by HZL (also a Vedanta company) thus being a related party transaction, we, the Government of India would like to reiterate our dissent," wrote Sanjeev Verma, a director in the ministry. "We would urge the company to explore other cashless methods of acquisition of these assets." "We would like to bring to your attention that the Government of India will oppose any proposed resolutions in furtherance of such

Battle lines

Centre reiterates its opposition to the erstwhile PSU's proposal to acquire its private parent group's foreign zinc assets



- Mines Ministry's Feb. 17 letter to HZL notes that the government's dissent was recorded by its three representatives at the Jan. 19 board meeting

- Govt. has a residual 29.5% stake and has plans to divest it over time

- 'The company is requested to not take any further action', cautions Ministry

agenda matter and will explore all legal avenues available... the company is requested to not take any further action," Mr. Verma cautioned.

In response, HZL's company secretary pointed out on Monday that the proposed transaction needed shareholders' approval as per SEBI and Companies Act norms. "The matter shall be placed before the Board... for its consideration," the official added.

'CEREAL PRICES LIKELY TO STAY ELEVATED GOING INTO NEXT FISCAL'

Prices of cereals are unlikely to rise further as witnessed in the recent past but may remain elevated well into the next fiscal due to vagaries of climate change, strong global and domestic demand, rating agency Crisil said.

Anticipation of higher production of wheat in current rabi season is expected to improve the stock condition, which may put downward pressure on prices, though heatwaves remain a key monitorable, Crisil said.



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