

WORLD

Caution urged as borders reopen in Asia

Move toward 'living with COVID-19' require robust measures, experts say

By YANG HAN and PRIME SARMIENTO in Hong Kong

As more Asian countries look at reopening their borders and economies with a "living with COVID" strategy, experts said governments should remain cautious and prepare plans in case of a rise in infections.

"As we think about opening up, the most important thing to emphasize is that not only should there be a plan for relaxing restrictions, but there should at the same time be a plan for what to do in case restrictions are needed again," said Jerome Kim, director-general of the nonprofit International Vaccine Institute in Seoul. "(Governments) should discuss what the plans are for reinstating requirements."

Kim added that if the hospitalization rate reaches 80 percent of intensive care unit capacity and overwhelms the health system, then measures will need to be taken either locally or nationally.

Across Asia, an increasing number of governments are gradually moving toward coexisting with COVID-19 and reopening their borders for economic recovery.

Malaysia is eyeing a trial border reopening for international tourists next month. Singapore, one of the first countries to declare that it will be "living with COVID-19", is allowing quarantine-free entry for a number of countries and regions, including China. Singapore has fully vaccinated 84 percent of its population and is expected to launch a vaccinated tourist lane with South Korea in mid-November.

Thailand will reopen to vaccinated foreign visitors from 46 countries from Monday, while Vietnam plans to reopen the resort island of Phu Quoc in late November.

Thira Woratanarat, associate professor at the Department of Preventive and Social Medicine at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, said Asian countries have learned from the experience of Chile and Denmark, which opened recently after achieving vaccination rates of over 70 percent and saw their daily new infection num-

bers double in the past three weeks.

Thira said Thailand is in a riskier position than other countries, given that the Southeast Asian nation is reporting high daily infection numbers, and has a limited screening capacity.

"The most worrisome issue is that only 39.9 percent of the population have been fully vaccinated," said Thira, adding that the government needs to enhance its COVID-19 screening capacity and strengthen precautions.

In Indonesia, the resort island of Bali reopened on Oct 14 to fully vaccinated travelers from 19 countries, but they have to test negative and undergo a five-day quarantine in a hotel. As of Wednesday, the vaccination rate in Indonesia was just over 33 percent.

Endemic expected

Noting that Malaysia had vaccinated 94.4 percent of its adult population as of Monday, molecular virus expert Vinod Balasubramanian from Monash University Malaysia said he agrees with Malaysia reopening its borders and stringent procedures can be put in place to mitigate the risk of importing new infections as it remains cautious about new variants and potential risks.

"Malaysia is on the right track in living with COVID-19," said Balasubramanian, noting the expectation that COVID-19 will become endemic.

Nikolaus Osterrieder, dean of the Jockey Club College of Veterinary Medicine and Life Sciences at the City University of Hong Kong, said the reopening of borders needs "a mixed approach". Vaccinated travelers can come in, but they still need to be tested and undergo a short quarantine period. Vaccinations will reduce the risk, but health officials also need to keep in mind the number of vulnerable people like the elderly or those who have underlying health conditions when deciding to reopen borders.

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Cyclists ride past the city skyline during the COVID-19 pandemic in Singapore on Thursday. EDGAR SU / REUTERS

More action needed to help end conflict in Yemen

By JAN YUMUL in Hong Kong jan@chinadailyapac.com

The international community must take a more proactive role to help bring an end to the yearslong conflict in Yemen, experts said after the United Nations lamented another regrettable "milestone" in the war.

James Elder, a spokesperson for the UN children's agency UNICEF, said on Oct 19 that the Yemen conflict has hit another "shameful milestone" as 10,000 children have been killed or maimed since fighting started in March 2015.

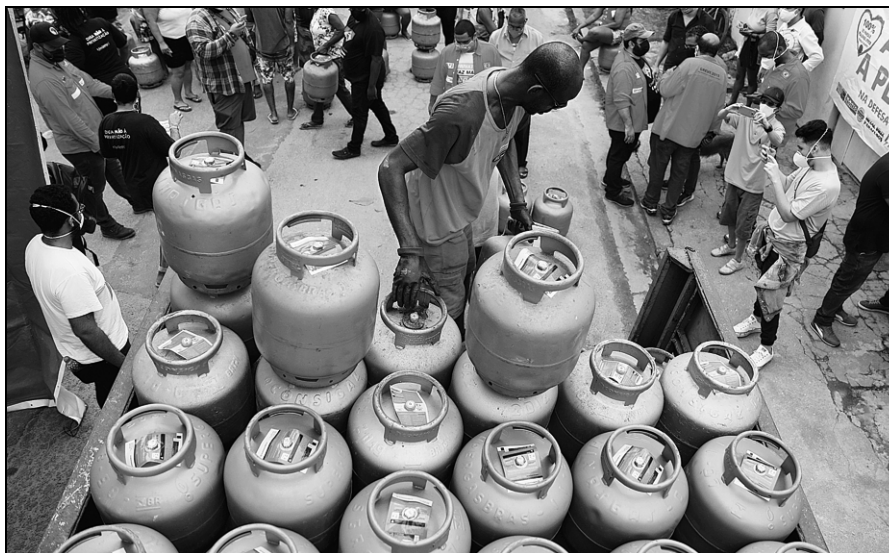
"That's the equivalent of four children every day," said Elder at a UN news conference in Geneva after returning from Yemen.

UNICEF estimates that more than 11 million children in Yemen need humanitarian assistance and that 1.7 million children are now internally displaced because of the violence.

Abdulghani Al-Iryani, a senior researcher at the Yemen-based Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies, said that despite the already staggering estimates, the numbers in regard to the victims of conflict are "underreported". In the Marib region, tens of thousands of civilians are caught in the crossfire.

"The UK and the US are active participants in this conflict," Al-Iryani said. "As parties to the conflict, they have a duty of care of the civilian population that they have bombed and laid siege on."

Timely assistance



A Brazilian worker unloads cooking gas cylinders for residents to buy at a fair price amid high energy prices caused by inflation, as part of an initiative organized by the Federation of Oil Workers in Rio de Janeiro on Thursday. PILAR OLIVARES / REUTERS

Votes ahead for Biden's 'historic' plan

WASHINGTON — US President Joe Biden announced on Thursday that he and Democrats in Congress have reached a "historic" framework for his sweeping domestic policy package. But he still needs to lock down votes from colleagues for what is now a dramatically scaled-back bill.

Eager to have a deal in hand before his departure for global summits, Biden made his case privately to House Democrats on Capitol Hill and publicly in a speech at the White House. He is now pressing for a still-robust package — \$1.75 trillion of social services and climate change programs — that the White House believes can pass the 50-50 Senate.

The fast-moving developments put Democrats closer to a hard-fought deal, but battles remain as they press to finish the final draft in the days and weeks ahead.

Together with a nearly \$1 trillion bipartisan infrastructure bill, Biden claimed the infusion of federal investments would be a domestic achievement modeled on those of Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson.

"I need your votes," Biden told lawmakers at the Capitol, according to a person who requested anonymi-

ty to discuss the private remarks.

But final votes will not be called for some time. The revised package has lost some top priorities, frustrating many lawmakers as the president's ambitions make way for the political realities of the narrowly divided Congress.

Paid family leave and efforts to lower prescription drug pricing are now gone entirely from the package, drawing outrage from some lawmakers and advocates.

Long list

Still in the mix are a long list of other priorities: Free prekindergarten for all youngsters, expanded healthcare programs — including the launch of a new \$35 billion hearing aid benefit for people with Medicare — and \$555 billion to tackle climate change.

There is also a one-year extension of a child care tax credit that was put in place during the COVID-19 pandemic and new child care subsidies. An additional \$100 billion to bolster the immigration and border processing system could boost the overall package to \$1.85 trillion if it clears Senate rules.

"I look forward to getting this done," said Senator Kyrsten Sinema,

a pivotal Democratic holdout.

However, Senator Joe Manchin was less committal. "This is all in the hands of the House right now," he said.

The two Democrats have almost single-handedly reduced the size and scope of their party's big vision, and are crucial to sealing the deal.

Republicans remain overwhelmingly opposed, forcing Biden to rely on the Democrats' narrow majority in Congress with no votes to spare in the Senate and few in the House.

Taking form after months of negotiations, Biden's emerging bill would still be among the most sweeping of its kind in a generation, modeled on New Deal and Great Society programs. The White House calls it the largest ever investment in climate change and the biggest improvement to the nation's healthcare system in more than a decade.

In his meeting with lawmakers at the Capitol, Biden made clear how important it was to show progress as he headed to the summits.

"We are at an inflection point," he said. "The rest of the world wonders whether we can function."

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA

Doha meet shows Taliban govt progress

By LIU XUAN

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The Taliban's latest promise on domestic and international issues reflects their progressive intentions, and experts said the international community should be patient to see what they will do for the future development of war-torn Afghanistan.

Shu Meng, a researcher in the Middle East Studies Institute at Shanghai International Studies University, said China's constructive participation could have a positive influence on the stability of the situation in Afghanistan, the reconstruction of the country and the development of its economy.

Three months after their first meeting, State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi renewed dialogue on Monday in the Qatar capital Doha with Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, a senior figure in the Taliban-led interim government.

Baradar voiced his appreciation for the respect and friendship shown by China toward Afghanistan, and

said it is the Taliban's steadfast choice to follow a friendly policy toward China and they look forward to strengthening collaboration with its neighbor in various fields.

Baradar once again made a promise to China, saying that the Taliban attach great importance to China's security concerns, and reiterated their pledge of not allowing any individual or group from the Afghan territory to hurt China.

Compared with the Taliban's promises in Tianjin in July, Shu said the new remarks are "more positive", showing the Taliban's attitude toward ties with China.

Zhu Yongbiao, director of the Center for Afghanistan Studies at Lanzhou University, said the exchange in Doha indicated mutual respect between China and the Taliban.

China's insistence on not interfering in the domestic affairs of Afghanistan and its timely assistance have also prompted the Taliban to fulfill their promise, he was quoted by the Global Times as saying.

The interim government also said

it will draw lessons from its history and take a path that is suited to its national conditions.

In response to concerns, Baradar said they are willing to step up efforts to protect the rights and interests of women and children, and will not deprive them of their right to education and work. He also admitted that the Taliban still face difficulties such as insufficient facilities and shortage of funds.

Though the international society believes that there are still problems with women's issues in the country, Shu said the Taliban have indeed made some improvement in "returning to civil society".

"Under such circumstances, Baradar's remarks are a commitment to the international community, with the purpose of cutting out past bad deeds in order to gain more recognition and support from the outside world," Shu said.

His statement has reflected the Taliban's progressive intentions, and the world needs to be patient to see the Taliban's "deeds", she added.

China calls for in-depth UN-Africa cooperation

By MINLU ZHANG in New York minluzhang@chinadailyusa.com

China's ambassador to the United Nations on Thursday called for in-depth cooperation between the UN and the African Union and put forward four aspects for strengthening ties.

"The UN and AU are close partners. Against the backdrop of dramatic changes in the political, economic and social landscape in the world and in African countries, and the new challenges they face, the UN and AU need to strengthen their cooperation more than ever," said Zhang Jun, China's permanent representative to the UN, during the UN Security Council's Virtual High-Level Debate on Cooperation between the UN and the AU.

The first aspect is to help African nations overcome the pandemic at an early date, he said.

"We call on developed countries to stop overstocking vaccines, increase aid to Africa, and achieve universal access to safe and affordable vaccines in that continent at an early date," said Zhang, adding that it is the key to help Africa overcome COVID-19.

"We need to push for intellectual property rights exemptions for developing countries, including Africa, to localize production of vaccines."

Next is the need to assist Africa in solving the outstanding peace and security problems it faces. The envoy pointed out that the AU and subregional organizations have geographical, historical and cultural advantages, and can play a unique role in addressing hot spot issues in Africa, Zhang said, adding that the UN needs to encourage its partners to increase their support to secure predictable and sustainable sources of funding for their independent peace operations.

Root causes

The third aspect is to focus on addressing the root causes of conflict in Africa. Zhang pointed out that post-pandemic reconstruction is an opportunity to promote inclusive development and address the root causes of conflict.

Fourth is the need to support Africa's strength in unity.

"Africa has a tradition of independence, and the AU is the banner of Africa's unity and self-reliance. We need to respect the sovereignty and leadership of African countries and support African countries in exploring and following development paths well suited to their national conditions," he said.

The envoy emphasized that African countries are in the best position to say how the continent's problems should be solved and how it should be governed.

"China stands opposed to interference in the internal affairs, the imposition of governance models, the incitement of contradictions or divisions among African countries, the practice of attaching a political string to aid, and the attempt to use Africa to seek political self-interest," he said. "Such practices have no market and therefore won't work in Africa."



A little girl walks around a camp for internally displaced people in Yemen's northeastern city of Marib. AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

which he said, have been "directly and indirectly responsible for the humanitarian crisis."

Rasha Al Joundy, senior researcher at the Dubai Public Policy Research

Centre, said: "This war should end, and the Yemenis deserve better and (have) suffered enough."

Xinhua contributed to this story.