

## International

# China bans exams for six-year-olds as Beijing retools education system

## Reform expected to relieve pressure on pupils and parents

BEIJING: Beijing yesterday banned written exams for six- and seven-year-olds, as part of sweeping education reforms aimed at relieving pressure on pupils and parents in China's hyper-competitive school system. China's exam-oriented system previously required students to take exams from first grade onwards, culminating in the feared university entrance exam at age 18 known as the gaokao, where a single score can determine a child's life trajectory.



### China's school system remains hyper-competitive

"Too frequent exams ... which cause students to be overburdened and under huge exam pressure," have been axed by the Ministry of Education, according to new guidelines released yesterday. The ministry said the pressure on pupils from a young age "harms their mental and physical health."

The regulations also limit exams in other years of compulsory education to once a term, with mid-term and mock examinations allowed in junior high school. The measures are part of wider government reforms of China's education sector, which include a crackdown on cram schools—seen by parents as a way to inflate their children's educational fortunes.

In late July, China ordered all private tutoring firms to turn non-profit, and barred tutoring agencies from giving lessons in core subjects at weekends and holi-



SHENYANG, China: First-year pupils arrive at a primary school for the new semester in Shenyang in China's northeastern Liaoning province yesterday. — AFP

days, effectively crippling a \$100 billion sector. The aim is to reduce China's education inequality, where some middle-class parents willingly fork out 100,000 yuan (\$15,400) or more per year on private tutoring to get their children into top schools.

Many also snag property in schools' catchment areas, driving up house prices. "There is no other country that has such a strong tutoring culture (as China)," said Claudia Wang, partner and Asia education lead at Shanghai-based consulting firm Oliver Wyman. With population growth at its slowest in decades, Chinese authorities lifted a two-child birth limit earlier this year and wish to increase incentives for parents to have more children.

Beijing city authorities last week announced that teachers must rotate schools every six years, to prevent a concentration of top talent at some schools. Education officials on Monday reiterated a ban on schools setting up "priority" classes for gifted students. The Ministry of Education also banned written homework for first- and second-graders earlier this year, and limited homework for junior high students to no more than 1.5 hours per night. However, many Chinese parents still regard education as a path to social mobility.

The gaokao is one of the few ways that poor, rural students can access better educational opportunities and job prospects at top universities. — AFP

## Afghan ex-minister delivers food in Germany now

LEIPZIG: He was once a minister in Afghanistan but quit, fed up with the corruption. Now in Germany, Sayed Sadaat is making a living delivering meals as a bicycle courier. For six hours on weekdays and from noon to 10pm on Saturdays and Sundays, Sadaat dons his distinctive orange coat and big square backpack, shuttling pizzas or other orders to customers.

"There is no shame in the job at all. Work is work," he told AFP. "If there is a job, it means there is public demand... someone has to do it," he said. Sadaat is one of thousands of Afghans who have found a home in Germany over the last years. Since 2015, when Europe saw a huge influx of people fleeing wars mostly from Syria and Iraq, around 210,000 Afghans have sought asylum in Germany. This makes them the second biggest group of people seeking protection in Europe's most populous country after Syrians.

With the Taleban's return to power earlier this month, Germany has also evacuated around 4,000 Afghans, including those who worked with NATO forces and others who need protection.

### 'For private benefit'

Sadaat's journey to Germany was far less harrowing. He was minister of communications in Afghanistan from 2016 to 2018. But the 50-year-old said he quit his post because he was fed up with corruption in the government. "When doing the job as a minister there was a difference between the president's close circle and myself," he explained. "Their demands were for private benefit, I wanted the money for government projects to be implemented properly. 'So I could not fulfil their demands and then they tried to push me, put pressure on me from the president's side.'"

He took on a consultancy job in the telecommunica-



LEIPZIG, Germany: Sayed Sadaat, former communications minister in Afghanistan, poses for a photo in Leipzig, eastern Germany on Sunday. — AFP

tions sector in Afghanistan. But by 2020, the security situation had deteriorated, he said. "So I decided to leave," he said. As a dual Afghan-British citizen, he decided to move to Germany at the end of 2020 before Brexit made it no longer possible for Britons to obtain residency in the EU without conditions such as an offer of employment. He could have secured a post in Britain, but said he saw more opportunities for his sector in Germany. But without German, Sadaat, who came alone and refuses to talk about his family, said he has struggled to get employed.

The coronavirus pandemic delayed his plans to learn to speak German. But he is now taking language classes four hours a day, before getting on the bicycle for food delivery company Lieferando. The job pays up to 15 euros (\$18) an hour, enough for his living expenses, including rent of 420 euros a month. Sadaat said he does not regret his decision to move to Germany. "I know this challenge is for a short time, it is until I can get another job," he said, touting the physical benefits of cycling 1,200 kilometers (745 miles) every month. With the return to power of the Taleban and the withdrawal of NATO forces from his native country, he sees another possible opening for him in Germany. — AFP

The development on the 5-megawatt reactor in Yongbyon—North Korea's main nuclear complex—comes with nuclear talks between Pyongyang and Washington at a standstill. North Korean leader Kim Jong Un offered to dismantle part of the Yongbyon complex at a second summit with then US president Donald Trump but not other sites, in exchange for sanctions relief, and his offer was rejected. North Korea is under multiple sets of international sanctions over its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs, which have seen rapid progress under Kim. "Since early July, there have been indications, including the discharge of cooling water, consistent with the operation of the reactor," the International Atomic Energy Agency said in its annual report.

The Yongbyon reactor appeared to have been inactive from December 2018 until then, added the report dated Friday. IAEA inspectors were kicked out of North Korea in 2009, and the agency has since monitored it from outside. The possible operation of the reactor follows a recent indication that Pyongyang is also using a nearby radiochemical laboratory to separate plutonium from spent fuel previously removed from the reactor.

The signs of the reactor and laboratory operations were "deeply troubling", the IAEA said, adding the activities were a "clear violation" of UN resolutions. A senior US State Department official said Washington was aware of the report and was closely coordinating with partner countries. "This report underscores the urgent need for dialogue and diplomacy so we can achieve the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula," the official told AFP. "We continue to seek dialogue with the DPRK so we can address this reported activity and the full range of issues related to denuclearization." US North Korea envoy Sung Kim last week re-iterated his willingness to meet his North Korean counterparts "anywhere, at any time". The Biden administration has previously promised a "practical, calibrated approach", including diplomatic efforts, to persuade the impoverished North to give up its banned weapons programs. — AFP

## N Korea appears to have restarted nuke reactor: UN

PYONGYAG: Nuclear-armed North Korea appears to have restarted its plutonium-producing reprocessing reactor in a "deeply troubling" development, the UN atomic agency has said, a possible sign Pyongyang is expanding its banned weapons program.



This file satellite handout image provided by GeoEye on August 22, 2012 shows the Yongbyon Nuclear Scientific Research Centre in North Korea. — AFP

## 'Circumcision season' begins in Philippines after virus delays

MANILA: For more than a year, Caspian Gruta has been teased because his circumcision—a rite of passage for boys in the Philippines—was delayed, first by a volcanic eruption and then the coronavirus pandemic. "I worry if I don't get circumcised now, I will be shamed," said Gruta, 12.

The Philippines has one of the highest rates of circumcision in the world, with many seeing the centuries-old practice as key for boys to enter manhood. Even as circumcision comes under increasing scrutiny elsewhere, with some critics branding it "child abuse", it is rarely questioned in the Philippines and boys face tremendous pressure to undergo the procedure. Every year, thousands of pre-teens have the operation for free at government or community-sponsored clinics.

But last year, the "circumcision season" was cancelled for the first time in living memory due to the virus outbreak, delaying the milestone for many boys like Gruta. Left in limbo—and with their foreskin intact—the boys have been ridiculed by their male relatives and friends.

Gruta was one of the oldest boys to line up at a covered basketball court turned make-shift clinic in Silang, Cavite south of Manila, one of the few provinces that have slowly resumed the free service since May. "I feel like I'm a genuine Filipino now because getting circumcised is part of being a Filipino," Gruta said after the 20-minute procedure.

Wearing masks and face shields, the boys sat on plastic chairs near a row of wooden tables surrounded by a red curtain. Some looked excited or did their best to appear nonchalant. Others fidgeted as they waited. After removing their shorts, the youngsters lay down on a table with their legs hanging over the edge and their groin covered by an operating sheet.

Some bit into a facecloth or covered their eyes as they were given a local anesthetic. The surgeon then went to work. "I got circumcised because they said I will grow taller and I will get better in sports," said 12-year-old Almer Alcero, who went to another outdoor clinic for his delayed procedure.

His family could not afford a private hospital where the operation costs as much as 12,000 pesos (\$240) — more than what many workers earn in a month. While he waited for the free service to resume, Alcero's friends mocked him as "uncircumcised"—an insult similar to coward in a country where the procedure is a badge of masculinity. "I'm happy that I'm finally circumcised," Alcero said. Circumcision has been practiced in the Philippines for centuries, enduring wars and colonization by Spain and the United States. Male circumcision tends to be more common in nations with significant Muslim or Jewish populations, and less so in Catholic-majority places. Yet around 90 percent of males are circumcised for non-religious reasons in the Philippines, according to World Health Organization data. — AFP



SILANG, Philippines: Boys taking part in a mass circumcision at a covered court in Silang town, Cavite province. — AFP

### News in brief

#### Australian in drug-pushing case

SYDNEY: An Australian man in his 60s has been charged with allegedly dealing in prohibited drugs from his retirement home, police and local media said yesterday. Police said they arrested the man on Thursday after finding methamphetamine and cannabis during a vehicle stop. They later searched his home in a retirement village in Dural, Sydney and uncovered LSD, more cannabis and a baton, the statement added. The drug investigation began in June, police said. — AFP

#### 11 killed in Peru river accident

LIMA: A collision of two boats on the Amazon in Peru Sunday has left at least 11 passengers dead and others missing, the government said. The accident took place at 05:30 local time (1030 GMT) on the Huallaga River, in Muyuna, when a barge full of passengers that was sailing towards the city of Yurimaguas crashed into another freight barge amid dense mist at dawn, according to state channel TV Peru. "So far there is an undetermined number of missing persons, as well as 11 dead and six injured," the National Institute of Civil Defense said in a statement. Firefighters, policemen and sailors are in charge of the search for the disappeared. — AFP

#### France's COVID aid hits \$283bn

PARIS: The French government has extended 240 billion euros (\$283 billion) in financial aid to businesses hammered by the coronavirus pandemic since March 2020, mainly in the form of state-guaranteed loans, Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire announced yesterday. President Emmanuel Macron vowed to protect French companies and their employees "whatever the cost" after many were forced to close during three nationwide lockdowns since the outbreak began. "The bill for 'whatever the cost' stands at 80 billion euros in subsidies, and 160 billion euros in loans," Le Maire told France Inter radio. — AFP

#### Greek envoy's wife in Brazil jailed

RIO DE JANEIRO: A Brazilian court has sentenced Francoise de Souza Oliveira to 31 years in prison for murdering her husband, Greek ambassador Kyriakos Amiridis, authorities said Sunday. Amiridis, 59 at the time of his death in 2016, lived in Brasilia and was on vacation for the Christmas holidays with his wife and his daughter in Rio de Janeiro. Days after Christmas, the remains of the diplomat were found inside his charred rental car and ripped out under a bridge, in the municipality of Nova Iguaçu, near the state capital. — AFP

#### 7,000 protest in Athens

ATHENS: Around 7,000 people protested in Athens on Sunday against a new rule obliging health workers to get vaccinated against COVID-19, said police who fired teargas to quell violence among the demonstrators. The rule change, which came into effect on Wednesday requires that all personnel working in hospitals be vaccinated. The demonstrators waved Greek flags and brandished placards declaring: "We are not against vaccines, but against fascism" and "Long live democracy". — AFP

## Malaysian PM misses cabinet swearing-in

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia's new prime minister missed the inauguration of his own cabinet yesterday after coming into contact with someone infected with the coronavirus and being forced to self-isolate, his office said.

Ismail Sabri Yaakob's ministers headed to the national palace for a swearing-in ceremony before the king, two weeks after the previous government collapsed during infighting. But Ismail Sabri — himself inaugurated earlier this month — had to skip the occasion after the virus contact, his office said in a statement, without giving further details.

He will also have to virtually join celebrations today to mark Malaysia's National Day. The new cabinet mainly comprises ministers from the previous government, prompting concerns they will be no better at combatting a fierce Covid-19 wave than their widely criticized predecessors.

Ismail Sabri was appointed by the king after Muhyiddin Yassin quit when he lost his parliamentary majority, and during growing public anger at the government's pandemic response. He has reclaimed the premiership for scandal-plagued party the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), three years after they lost it at landmark elections. Malaysia has been hit hard by the highly contagious Delta variant, reporting around 20,000 cases a day in recent weeks as well as hundreds of deaths. — AFP