

## International

# China logs first COVID death in eight months

## WHO huddles on new coronavirus strains

**WUHAN:** China recorded its first COVID-19 death in eight months yesterday, as experts huddled to discuss worrying new strains of the coronavirus that are spreading rapidly around the globe. The gathering in Geneva of the World Health Organization's emergency committee comes as their colleagues landed in Wuhan for a long-delayed mission to find the origins of the virus. More than 91 million people have been infected, with almost two million of them dying, according to figures widely thought to be an underestimate.

Much of the planet is enveloped in a second or third wave of the disease, with populations chafing under painful and economically damaging restrictions. China—where the virus first emerged—has again locked down millions of people as it fights to control a fresh outbreak that has now claimed its first victim, sparking anguish on social media. The hashtag “New virus death in Hebei” quickly ratcheted up 100 million views on the Twitter-like Weibo platform. “I haven’t seen the words ‘virusdeath’ in

so long, it’s a bit shocking! I hope the epidemic can pass soon,” one user wrote.

The death comes as a politically sensitive investigation into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic finally got under way with the arrival of a 10-strong team in Wuhan, where the virus emerged in late 2019. Mission leader Peter Ben Embarek said the group would start with a two-week quarantine at a hotel before the probe begins in earnest. But, he warned, it “could be a very long journey before we get a full understanding of what happened”. Beijing has argued Wuhan might not be where the virus originated, only where it was first identified. “I don’t think we will have clear answers after this initial mission, but we will be on the way,” Embarek added.

### Disneyland

Regardless of the virus’s origins, scientists say large-scale vaccination is the only way to escape its ravages. Programs have spluttered into life in a

number of countries, although progress is slower than many are hoping. In the United States, where more than 4,000 people are dying every day from the disease, around 10 million have received a first shot. California’s Disneyland threw open its doors Wednesday as a vaccination site, with 81-year-old Gary Dohman near the front of the queue. “Easy-piece of cake, nothing to it. Didn’t even feel it go in,” he said after getting his injection.

“I’ve been cooped up in a house for 10 months, can’t go anywhere. I want to get my second shot and do a little traveling.” There was some good news for those who have already had COVID-19, with one British study suggesting that recovery confers immunity for at least five months for most people. The research will be welcomed by Britain’s under-pressure healthcare workers struggling to cope with surging caseloads caused in part by a new, more infectious strain of the virus.

That strain, and another identified in South Africa, was going under the microscope in Geneva yesterday when the WHO’s emergency committee gathers. The newly identified variants have been logged in dozens of countries. The committee normally gathers every three months, but the WHO said the director-general pulled the meeting forward “to consider issues that need urgent discussion”.

Sport has provided a measure of diversion for many trapped in their homes, but top-flight athletes were warned this week they had to lead by example. English Premier League bosses told clubs they could be sanctioned if players hug or shake hands after goals. “We are fortunate to be able to continue to play and bring our competition to fans at home and around the world,” EPL chief executive Richard Masters said. “This brings justified additional scrutiny and the Premier League must take the lead in setting the right example to follow.” —AFP



**WUHAN:** Vladimir G Dedkov (center), a member of the World Health Organization (WHO) team investigating the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic, boards a bus following the team’s arrival yesterday. — AFP

## Hong Kong national security police make 11 new arrests

**HONG KONG:** Hong Kong’s national security police arrested 11 people in dawn raids yesterday, including a veteran human rights lawyer, on suspicion of helping a group of activists make a failed bid to flee the city by speedboat. “Eleven people were arrested by the national security department for ‘conspiracy to assist offenders,’” a senior police source told AFP. The officer confirmed those arrested were suspected of aiding 12 Hong Kong pro-democracy activists caught last August by Chinese coastguards as they tried to flee by boat to Taiwan.

Those on board were facing charges in Hong Kong for crimes linked to huge and often violent democracy protests that convulsed the finance hub in 2019. The arrests come a week after national security police detained more than 50 of the city’s most

prominent democracy activists for subversion, one of the new crimes listed in a sweeping national security law that Beijing imposed on the city last year. Among those detained yesterday was Daniel Wong, a veteran human rights lawyer and an outspoken supporter of Hong Kong’s democracy movement. “National security police arrived at my home around 6.10 am and I do not know at the moment which police station they will take me to,” Wong wrote on his Facebook page.

The 71-year-old is also the founder of a restaurant in Taipei which hires and helps Hong Kongers who have fled to the democratic island. Willis Ho, a former student leader, confirmed her mother was among those arrested. Last month a Chinese court jailed 10 of the 12 fugitives for up to three years for

“organizing and participating in an illegal border crossing”. Two teenagers were returned to Hong Kong to face charges including attempted arson and possession of offensive weapons.

It is not the first time people have been arrested on suspicion of trying to help the group escape Hong Kong. In October, nine people were detained by the city’s new national security unit and later granted bail. The national security law mandates up to life imprisonment for any offence Beijing views as “secession, subversion, collusion with foreign forces and terrorism”. At least 90 people have been arrested since the law’s enactment, including US-born human rights lawyer John Clancey, prominent activist Joshua Wong and pro-democracy media mogul Jimmy Lai. —AFP

### News in brief

#### Detained Canadians allowed calls

**BEIJING:** Two Canadians detained in China for over two years on spying charges were allowed to call their families out of “humanitarian considerations” over Christmas, Beijing said yesterday. Relations between Beijing and Ottawa have spiraled since China detained former diplomat Michael Kovrig and businessman Michael Spavor in 2018 - days after the arrest of Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou in Vancouver on fraud charges. While languishing in detention, the pair have had virtually no contact with the outside world. Virtual consular visits only resumed in October after a nine-month hiatus which authorities said was due to the coronavirus. — AFP

#### Hong Kong’s first website blocked

**HONG KONG:** A Hong Kong Internet provider said yesterday it had blocked access to a website following a police order, the first confirmed takedown using a new national security law imposed by Beijing last year. Unlike mainland China, Hong Kong has open internet access, but critics of Beijing fear powers given to the police under the new law could herald the end of that freedom. Internet users noticed the website HKChronicles was unreachable from some Hong Kong-based devices last week, and its owner put out a statement saying she believed authorities were blocking access. Police declined to comment, but yesterday Hong Kong Broadband Network—one of the city’s internet service providers—confirmed a takedown order had been issued. — AFP

#### 2 experts remain in Singapore

**GENEVA:** Two experts on an international mission to investigate the origins of COVID-19 in China are still in Singapore after testing positive for COVID antibodies, the WHO said yesterday. The World Health Organization said earlier that the international team of experts had landed in Wuhan for the long-delayed mission, but it later tweeted that two had yet to make it there. “Two scientists are still in #Singapore completing tests for #COVID19,” the UN health body said in a tweet. “All team members had multiple negative PCR and antibody tests for COVID-19 in their home countries prior to travelling,” it said. — AFP