

## International

# Students return to class in Shanghai and Beijing

## China's major cities gradually return to normality

BEIJING: Tens of thousands of students returned to school in Shanghai and Beijing yesterday after months of closures intended to curb the spread of the coronavirus, as China's major cities gradually return to normality. Shanghai students in their final year of middle and high school returned to classrooms, while only high-school seniors in Beijing were allowed back on campus to prepare for the all-important "gaokao" university entrance exam.

China has largely curbed the spread of the deadly disease, but is still on high alert with growing fears of imported cases and a second wave of domestic infections in the northeast.

Teenager Meng Xianghao said he was taking extra precautions on his first day back at Beijing's Chenjinglun High School. "I brought masks, garbage bags and disinfectant," Meng, who had just taken the subway for the first time in months, told AFP as children in masks and uniform track suits filed past police and officials to enter the school.

"I'm glad, it's been too long since I've seen my classmates," said 18-year-old student Hang Huan. "I've missed them a lot." A tent set up at the entrance was staffed by a person in a white hazmat suit, while a man wearing a container of disinfectant on his back sprayed the ground by the school gates. Across the country, schools that have been closed or online-only since January began gradually

reopening last month, while virus epicenter Wuhan is set to reopen its high schools on May 6.

Students in the capital will have their temperatures measured at school gates and must show a "green" health code on a special app that calculates a person's infection risk, according to China's Ministry of Education. The ministry said some schools in Beijing had rehearsed the reopening with mock "students" in advance.

### Welcome speeches

Footage from the Communist Party-run Beijing Daily showed some of the city's 49,000 high-school seniors

## China still on high alert over imported cases



in classrooms Monday, wearing masks at desks which were spaced evenly apart as teachers welcomed them back with speeches. A screen at the front showed a photo of Chinese President Xi Jinping, as the teacher talked to the class about the significance of overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic.

In some cafeterias, students are assigned fixed seating spots spaced at least one meter apart. Beijing still has strict measures in place to prevent a fresh outbreak, requiring visitors to the city to pass stringent testing requirements and complete lengthy quarantine periods. In Shanghai, some schools have set aside special rooms for isolating students with "abnormal temperatures," the ministry said. Beijing student Xiao Shuhan told AFP he thought some



SHANGHAI: Students wearing face masks arrive at the Huayu Middle School in Shanghai yesterday. Students returned to class yesterday for the first time since schools were closed down in January as part of efforts to stop the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus. — AFP

form of social distancing would continue even as classmates and friends reunite.

"We'll no longer put our arms around each other's shoulders," he said. The long absence from classrooms has added to the pressure on final-year students preparing for the high-stakes "gaokao"

exams, which is the only route to Chinese universities and notoriously difficult. "At school there's a certain atmosphere for learning and at home there is not," said Wang Yuchen, a 17-year-old student. China said in March that it would postpone the exams by one month to July this year. — AFP

## Yemen: Five years of devastating conflict

SANAA: Impoverished Yemen is mired in a devastating conflict between Iran-backed rebels and government forces that intensified after Saudi Arabia spearheaded a military intervention five years ago. Separatists further complicated the crisis on Sunday by declaring self-rule for the country's south. Here is an overview:

### Saudi-led intervention

In September 2014, Houthi rebels from the country's Zaidi Shiite minority in northern Yemen enter Sanaa, seizing the government headquarters. Backed by Shiite-majority Iran, the rebels ally themselves with military units loyal to ex-president Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was forced to quit after a 2011 uprising. As well as the capital, they seize swathes of territory, including the Red Sea port of Hodeida, a crucial entry point for imports and humanitarian aid. In February 2015, President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi flees to second city Aden.

A coalition led by Sunni-ruled Saudi Arabia, the bitter regional rival of Iran, enters the conflict on March 26, 2015 with air strikes on the rebels. Washington says it is contributing logistics and intelligence. As the rebels advance on Aden, Hadi flees, taking refuge in Saudi Arabia. The coalition's intervention helps pro-government forces to secure the southern port city and in October they announce they have retaken control of the Bab Al-Mandab strait, a key waterway for international shipping.

### Battle for aid port

In June 2018, government fighters, backed by Saudi and Emirati ground forces, launch an offensive to retake the port city of Hodeida. UN-brokered talks between the warring parties open in December, yielding a series of breakthroughs including a ceasefire in Hodeida where fighting largely stops.

### Southern separatists

The anti-Houthi camp is divided, with fighting breaking out repeatedly between southern separatists and unionist forces loyal to Hadi's government. In January 2018, the separatists occupy the presidential palace in Aden, before Saudi and Emirati forces intervene. South Yemen was an independent state until unifying with the north in 1990, and separatists remain powerful. In August 2019, separatists in Aden from the UAE-trained Security Belt force clash with unionist troops backed by Riyadh. In November, a power-sharing accord is signed between the two parties, but is never implemented. On April 26, 2020, the separatists declare self-governance for the south, and the accord with the government crumbles.

### New escalation

On January 18, a missile strike on a loyalist military camp blamed on the Houthis kills 116 people and injures dozens. In early March, the rebels seize key provincial capital Al-Hazm after heavy fighting with government troops. On April 8, the Saudi-led coalition declares a two-week coronavirus ceasefire. A few hours into the ceasefire, which begins the following day, Houthi rebels dismiss the initiative as political maneuvering. Yemeni pro-government forces and Houthi rebels report several air raids in the northern districts of Al-Jawf and Hajjah. — AFP

## India's rural poor lose out as drones map village land

BANGKOK: A government plan to map residential areas in rural India and issue title deeds could benefit hundreds of millions of people, but exclude lower-caste communities and those traditionally denied land, human rights experts said yesterday. Prime Minister Narendra Modi last week unveiled Swamitva Yojana, or Ownership Scheme, to map rural residential land for the first time in many Indian states, using drones and other technologies.

The program will be piloted in six states, and the titles can be used as collateral for loans, the prime minister said. It will also generate more revenue for states, which can be used to fund infrastructure and other public facilities. "Most residential properties in rural areas don't have proper ownership documents, and only providing people with a title deed can change that," Modi said in a video address. While India's agricultural land was surveyed in the British colonial period, areas where homes were built in villages - known as abadi land and measuring no more than 0.5 sq km - were considered as wasteland and rarely surveyed.

As India's population expanded and pressure on



SILIGURI: Laborers pluck tea leaves after the government eased a nationwide lockdown imposed as a preventive measure against the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus at Kiranchandra Tea Garden, some 20 kms from Siliguri. — AFP

land grew for farming and for building roads and airports, disputes over land ownership have increased, with about two-thirds of civil court cases related to land and property, according to researchers. A federal land record modernization program launched in 2008 seeks to re-survey all lands, verify and upgrade records, and put all the information online by 2021. Authorities have said this will help monitor land sales better, increase tax revenue and reduce corruption. Some states, including Maharashtra and Odisha, had also launched surveys of rural, residential land.

## Train likely belonging to North Korea's Kim seen at resort town

SEOUL: A train likely belonging to North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has been spotted at a resort town in the country's east, satellite photos reviewed by a US-based think tank showed, as speculation persists over his health. The train was parked at a station reserved for the Kim family in Wonsan on April 21 and April 23, the respected 38North website said in a report published Saturday. 38North cautioned that the train's presence "does not prove the whereabouts of the North Korean leader or indicate anything about his health". "But it does lend weight to reports that Kim is staying at an elite area on the country's eastern coast," it said.

There has been growing conjecture about Kim's health since his conspicuous absence from the April 15 celebrations for the birthday of his grandfather Kim Il Sung, the regime's founder - the most important day on the North Korean political calendar. Kim has not made a public appearance since presiding over a meeting of the Workers' Party politburo on April 11 and inspecting drills by fighter jets at an air defense unit, which was reported by state media on April 12.

### Out of sight

Daily NK, an online media outlet run mostly by North Korean defectors, has reported Kim underwent a cardiovascular procedure earlier this month and was recovering at a villa in North Pyongan province. Citing an unidentified source inside the country, it said Kim, who is in his mid-30s, had needed urgent treatment due to heavy smoking, obesity and fatigue.

South Korea, which is still technically at war with the North, has played down the report. CNN, quoting what it said was an anonymous US official, reported that Washington was "monitoring intelligence" that Kim was in "grave danger" after undergoing surgery. But on Thursday, US President Donald Trump rejected reports that Kim was ailing. "I think the report was incorrect," Trump told reporters, but declined to state when



WONSAN: This satellite image shows the resort town of Wonsan. A train likely belonging to North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has been spotted at a resort town in the country's east. — AFP

he was last in touch with him. "We have a good relationship with North Korea, as good as you can have," he said.

Trump has met Kim three times in historic summitry and has voiced admiration for him, although hopes have dimmed for reaching a comprehensive agreement. Reporting from inside the isolated North is notoriously difficult, especially on anything to do with its leadership, which is among its most closely guarded secrets. On Thursday, citing an unidentified government official, South Korean broadcaster SBS reported that Kim appeared to have been in Wonsan for at least the past four days and would soon return to the public eye.

The report added that the military was monitoring Kim's train, which had been seen in Wonsan, while his personal jet - frequently used by Kim on his trips to Wonsan - remained in Pyongyang. Previous absences from the public eye on Kim's part have prompted speculation about his health. In 2014 he dropped out of sight for nearly six weeks before reappearing with a cane. Days later, the South's spy agency said he had undergone surgery to remove a cyst from his ankle. — AFP

### No access

Digitisation of records could exclude lower-caste communities who have traditionally been denied land, and make them more vulnerable to evictions, land experts said. "Property disputes in villages arise mainly as a result of manipulation of land records by officials. Also, when land holdings are not properly surveyed," said EAS Sarma, a land activist and former government official.

"Digitisation has worsened the situation because it has reduced transparency for small farmers who find it difficult to access digital records," he said. Surveys of land must be conducted transparently, and records reviewed by all residents, Sarma said, otherwise disputes will persist and influential people will continue to gain at the expense of the marginalized.

The Swamitva Yojana also does not specify whether titles will be given jointly to women, and if customary titles that do not have a written record - such as those held by indigenous people - will be recognized, said Namita Wahi, a fellow at the Centre for Policy Research think tank in Delhi. "The absence of recognition of customary titles, especially over village commons, may create further opportunities for land grabs of common lands, which is one of the biggest causes of land conflict in India," she said. "Minus a proactive attempt to include Dalits, Adivasis (indigenous people) and women, there is a real danger of them being excluded," she said. — Reuters

## Million Australians download COVID-19 tracker app

SYDNEY: More than one million Australians have downloaded a new government smartphone app designed to make coronavirus contact tracing easier despite concerns about how authorities might use their data. Health minister Greg Hunt hailed take-up since the app was released Sunday evening as "extraordinary", adding that 1.1 million people had downloaded the program by yesterday morning.

The nation of 25 million people has uncovered just over 6,700 instances of COVID-19, with the rate of new cases falling to 10-20 per day despite widespread testing. Experts have heralded the "COVIDSafe" app as a way of improving authorities' ability to track new outbreaks of the disease. The app works by using smartphones' Bluetooth function to detect other users nearby. If a user tests positive, anyone who has been in close proximity can then be notified, making rapid tracking of the disease much easier.

The system is seen as a key stepping stone to removing social distancing restrictions that have shuttered bars, restaurants, offices and most classrooms for the last month. Hunt and others were at pains to stress the app is not a location tracker and that only state health authorities will use the data. There has been widespread concern about what Australia's conservative government - which has a record of pushing the boundaries of civil rights protections - would do with the data.

"This is simply about helping us find and alert anybody who may have been exposed to the virus," Hunt told Sky News. "It means that they can be diagnosed and protected earlier, and it can protect our nurses and our doctors, our seniors and our vulnerable Australians." Chief Medical Officer Brendan Murphy has said a "good take-up" would be just over 50 percent of the population. The early figure is around four percent and rising. The app's release comes as some Australian states with zero new coronavirus cases tentatively announced an easing of stay-at-home restrictions. In Queensland, family picnics and weekend drives within a short distance of home will soon be permitted. — AFP