

International

Thousands protest against Serbia leader despite virus warning risks

Anger over pending return of COVID-19 restrictions

BELGRADE: Serbian police fired tear gas at anti-government protesters after being pelted with flares and stones on Wednesday as thousands protested in front of the Belgrade Parliament despite warnings that such gatherings could spread coronavirus infections. The evening before, violence erupted when a crowd stormed Parliament in protest of plans to reimpose a lockdown following a new spike in COVID-19 cases. Forty-three police officers and 17 protesters were injured and there were 23 arrests. Although President Aleksandar Vucic hinted Wednesday he may back down from his plan to introduce a weekend lockdown, demonstrators began gathering in front of the Serbian Parliament building around 6 pm.

In his address to the nation Wednesday, Vucic called on people to stop attending anti-government rallies to avoid a further spread of the coronavirus. "There are no free beds in our hospitals. We will open new hospitals," Vucic said. He accused far-right groups and unspecified regional "intelligence officials" of orchestrating riots to "undermine Serbia's position". Most of the protesters on Wednesday evening wore face masks, blew whistles and shouted "Vucic leave!" as they faced off with riot police guarding the Parliament complex. Some

threw stones and flares at police who responded with volleys of tear gas.

Interior Minister Nebojsa Stefanovic said 10 policemen have been injured. He did not say how many demonstrators have been hurt. TV footage showed policemen beating up protesters. Violence also erupted in the northern town of Novi Sad, Nis in the south and Kragujevac in central Serbia when police clashed with anti-government protesters. Vucic on Wednesday said he had ultimately advised the government and health authorities not to introduce a new lockdown in Belgrade. The government will announce a new set of restrictive measures on Thursday, he said.

Serbia, a country of 7 million, has reported 17,076 COVID-19 cases and 341 deaths. Health authorities say hospitals are running at full capacity and staff are exhausted. The number of new infections rose to 357 on Wednesday from 299 on Tuesday. Critics say the government's decisions to allow soccer matches, religious festivities, parties and private gatherings to resume and parliamentary elections to go ahead on June 21 are to blame for the new surge in infections. The government blames a lack of sanitary discipline among the public, especially in nightclubs. —Reuters



BELGRADE: Protesters clash with police in Belgrade as violence erupts against a weekend curfew announced to combat a resurgence of COVID-19 infections. —AFP

Texas resumes executions after 5-month virus break

HOUSTON: The US state of Texas on Wednesday executed an inmate convicted of murdering an elderly man during a 1993 robbery-ending a five-month halt to executions due to the coronavirus crisis. Billy Joe Wardlow, 45, was pronounced dead at 6:52 pm local time (23H52 GMT) after being given a lethal injection at the penitentiary in Huntsville, prison officials said.

His attorneys had filed an 11th-hour appeal with the US Supreme Court, but it was denied. With the help of his girlfriend at the time, Wardlow held up an elderly man, Carl Cole, in a bid to steal the man's truck. The 82-year-old Cole fought back, and Wardlow, then 18, shot him in the head. The fugitive couple tried to flee Texas for Montana, but were caught in South Dakota after a 15-hour drive from the small Texas town where the crime occurred.

In the Lone Star State, jurors on capital cases are required to establish if the accused would pose a future danger before handing down a death sentence. Wardlow's attorney, Richard Burr, had argued that his client was too young for that determination to be made with any "scientific certainty," and had filed for a stay of execution. Burr said research had shown that "because of continuing brain development until sometime in our early 20s, the neurological basis for a person's character, and hence his or her character, is not fully formed prior to the age of 21."

A 2005 decision by the US high court abolished capital punishment for those who committed murder at the age of 17 or younger. Wardlow's attorneys had argued that there is no discernible neurological difference between a 17-year-old and an 18-year-old, but to no avail. —AFP

Domestic workers 'will miss' TikTok

HONG KONG: TikTok's exit from Hong Kong was met with a shrug among many locals who distrust the Chinese social media platform, but the app had been embraced by many foreign domestic workers as a way to creatively escape the drudgery of their toil. The globally popular video-sharing app was used by many of the city's 370,000 foreign helpers, as they are commonly known in the finance hub. In between cooking, cleaning and childcare duties in Hong Kong's cramped family homes they filmed creative, witty and sometimes scathing insights into their daily lives.

But this week TikTok, owned by China's ByteDance, said it would no longer work in Hong Kong after a new security law imposed by Beijing gave authorities sweeping powers to police local users. Joane, a domestic worker from the Philippines, said she was "a bit sad" to see the app go. "It also helped me release some stress," she told AFP. "Being away from family, financial problems, stress from work" are among the challenges faced by helpers in the city, she said, adding that the app's popularity had taken off since the coronavirus pandemic meant workers like her were often stuck at home.

Poorly paid domestic workers, primarily from the Philippines and Indonesia, are the cogs that keep Hong Kong's economic engine running, enabling both parents of a family to hold down full-time jobs in the notoriously expensive city. Domestic workers must live with their employers in Hong Kong's tiny flats, are only entitled to one day off a week and often grapple with stressful work environments. "When (your) employer makes you... non-stop do this and do that

and do this and so on," reads the text in a video Joane posted in May. "Breathe in, breathe out... And say 'yes ma'am, yes sir'."

Limited traction

So popular is TikTok among women like Joane that the hashtag #ofwhk - "overseas foreign worker Hong Kong" - has been viewed nearly 12 million times on the platform. Local recruitment specialist Mirian Sim said she began using the app herself to communicate with and recruit migrant workers when she noticed how big its user base had become.

"I started using it as a way to bond with our existing helpers, to spread positive vibes and information for them," said Sim, whose agency Garford describes itself as an "ethical employment agency" that specializes in hiring Filipino helpers. But enthusiasm for the platform from foreign workers - and teenagers around the world - stands in stark contrast to the rest of Hong Kong. TikTok has gained little traction in the city, reporting just 150,000 local users last August. By comparison, Facebook currently has 5.6 million local users and Instagram has 2.6 million, according to analytics company NapoleonCat.

In a city rocked by anti-Beijing sentiment, few trust ByteDance's repeated assurances that it does not share any user information with Chinese authorities. Online forums used by Hong Kong democracy protesters have long advised people against downloading it, echoing security fears raised by the US government. Joane said domestic workers could ultimately live without the app. "We find TikTok very entertaining, but I know even if TikTok will be pulled out of Hong Kong, a lot of Filipino domestic workers can still manage," she said. "We always find ways to entertain ourselves." —AFP