

International

Australia offers safe haven, pathways to Hong Kongers

A risky challenge to China over its crackdown

SYDNEY: Australia yesterday offered pathways to permanent residency for thousands of people from Hong Kong, in a risky challenge to China over its crackdown on dissent in the city. Prime Minister Scott Morrison said his government was also suspending its extradition agreement with the city and in addition to extending the visas of 10,000 Hong Kongers already in the country, threw open the door to thousands more to start a new life Down Under.

Morrison said the decisions were taken in response to the imposition by China last week of a tough new security law in Hong Kong, which he said “constitutes a fundamental change of circumstances” for the semi-autonomous territory. “Australia is adjusting its laws, our sovereign laws, our sovereign immigration program, things that we have responsibility for and jurisdiction over, to reflect the changes that we’re seeing take place there,” he said during a press conference. Foreign Minister Marise Payne said China’s moves in Hong Kong were discussed yesterday with Australia’s so-called “Five Eyes” security partners—New Zealand, the United States, Britain, and Canada.

Morrison’s announcement came a day after China opened a new office in Hong Kong for its security agents to oversee implementation of the law targeting acts of subversion, secession, terrorism and foreign collusion. The law, which followed sometimes-violent pro-democracy protests, is the most radical change in Hong Kong’s freedoms since Britain handed the city

back to China in 1997 under an agreement designed to preserve its freedoms for 50 years. China has bristled at widespread global criticism of the law and Australia’s move to provide safe haven to some Hong Kong citizens was expected to worsen already rising tensions between the two.

Beijing in recent months has imposed tariffs on some Australian imports and impeded trade in other key commodities in response to Australian steps to counter Chinese interference in the country. China, Australia’s biggest trade partner and a competitor for influence in the Pacific, was notably infuriated when Canberra led calls for a probe into the origins of the coronavirus pandemic. New Zealand is also reviewing its relationship with Hong Kong because of the new law, Foreign Minister Winston Peters said, “including extradition arrangements, controls on exports of strategic goods, and travel advice”.

Permanent residency pathway

Morrison brushed aside questions about whether the challenge over Hong Kong would likely lead to further Chinese retaliation. “We will make decisions about what’s in our interests, and we will make decisions about our laws and our advisories, and we will do that rationally and soberly and consistently,” he said. Under the new measures, 10,000 Hong Kong citizens and residents in Australia on student or temporary work visas will be allowed to remain in the country for an additional five years. “If you’re a temporary visa holder, your visa will be extended to an ad-

ditional five years from today, in addition to the time you’ve already been in Australia, with a pathway to permanent residency at the end of that period,” Morrison said. The five-year visa and possible permanent residency were also offered to Hong Kong entrepreneurs or skilled

workers who wish to relocate to Australia in the future. “If there are businesses that wish to relocate to Australia, creating jobs, bringing investment, creating opportunities for Australia, then we will be very proactive in seeking to encourage that,” he said. — AFP



HONG KONG: Students run for shelter during a sudden but brief heavy downpour in Hong Kong. — AFP

China’s new strategy to tame second-wave virus outbreaks

BEIJING: A recent coronavirus outbreak in Beijing sowed fears of a second wave of infections in China, but officials appear to have beat back the disease with a new targeted strategy. Authorities did not repeat the drastic nationwide shutdown seen when the virus first spread from Wuhan earlier this year. Instead, they sealed off a limited number of residences and focused on mass testing, eventually screening more than half of the capital’s 21 million people. This approach seems to have paid off, with reported cases falling to single digits each day by early July and zero in the past three days. Here is a look at how China brought the new outbreak under control:

How did the outbreak begin?

China went to great lengths to protect its capital at the height of the pandemic, redirecting incoming flights to other cities and requiring visitors to undergo quarantine and virus tests. But by early June, with just a handful of active cases across the country, Beijing had relaxed many of its restrictions and locals were no longer made to wear masks outdoors.

The emergence of a new patient on June 11

shocked the city. Most of the 335 subsequent cases were traced to the sprawling Xinfadi wholesale market in southern Beijing, which was swiftly closed. Thousands of people were placed under quarantine and 11 million people were tested for the virus. The city banned outbound travel by residents living in at-risk areas and required others to show negative COVID-19 test results in order to leave. Authorities are still investigating the cause of the outbreak, but early tests found traces of the virus on a cutting board at Xinfadi used to process imported salmon.

China’s handling of pandemic

After the virus first began to spread from Wuhan, China imposed a strict lockdown of the city and surrounding Hubei province in January that confined nearly 60 million people to their homes. But in last month’s outbreak, Beijing used what city authorities called “precise control” to lock down residential areas one neighborhood at a time. All food and beverage workers across the city were required to take virus tests and some bars were ordered to shut. Most malls and restaurants in parts of the city where no cases had been detected were allowed to remain open, however. The city focused on tracing and rapidly isolating everyone who had potentially been exposed to the virus. Volunteers went door to door across the city, asking residents if they had been in contact with people who may have been exposed to the virus. The tracking took on a dystopian tone at times. Some residents were ordered to take virus tests after authorities used security camera footage of their car licence plates to determine that they had been near the market. — AFP

With apps, Japan offers glimpse of doctor visits

TOKYO: The coronavirus crisis has prompted Japan to ease regulations on remote medical treatment, creating an opening for tech companies and offering a glimpse of the future of healthcare in the world’s most rapidly ageing society. As coronavirus cases spiked in April, Japan temporarily eased restrictions on remote medical care, allowing doctors to conduct first-time visits online or by telephone and expanding the number of illnesses that can be treated remotely.

The changes mark a potential shake-up in one of the world’s biggest medical markets, which has lagged countries like Australia, China, and the United States in telemedicine. The reforms could also help Japan grapple with both a skyrocketing healthcare burden and few doctors in rural areas. Previously Japanese doctors were only allowed to treat recurring patients remotely, and for a limited number of diseases. The rapid pace of change caught executives at Line Corp off guard, forcing Japan’s most popular social networking service to accelerate plans for the roll-out of its Line Healthcare business in the coming

months. “The effect that COVID-19 brought was a huge innovation in the healthcare industry,” said Shinichiro Muroyama, representative director of Line Healthcare. “The situation has totally changed, much more rapidly than we thought.” Line, which says it has 84 million users in Japan, aims to link doctors and patients by video. Homegrown medical start-ups such as Medley Inc and MICIN Inc say they have also seen a surge in demand. Both companies offer application services for appointments, video consultations and payments.

Telehealth, or telemedicine, refers to technology that includes online consultations, cloud-based medical records, remote monitoring of patients and use of artificial intelligence to screen for diseases. Japan’s market for such technology is set to grow by 60% to nearly 20 billion yen (\$185 million) in the five years to March 2024, according to the Yano Research Institute. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has made deregulating the medical industry part of his growth strategy.

So Ishii, a doctor who runs a clinic in Tokyo that started offering telehealth in 2017, has seen a jump in online consultations since the outbreak, with 600 patients using the service as of mid-June compared to 400 two months earlier. Ishii said telehealth could lead to better treatment for patients with lifestyle-related diseases that require continuous attention because it gave them easier access to doctors. Such ailments typically include diabetes and high-blood pressure. — AFP