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Australia rejects China's racism warning

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HODEIDA: Children walk past tents at a displaced persons camp in the Khokha district of Yemen's western province of Hodeida. The world is facing an 'impending global food emergency' that could impact hundreds of millions of people as the coronavirus pandemic threatens already strained supply chains, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned yesterday. — AFP

Virus' shocks to fuel unrest, hunger

Some 'starving' in North Korea

LONDON: Economic shocks caused by the new coronavirus are set to fuel poverty, unrest and instability in heavily-indebted and politically fragile countries for years to come, found an international think-tank yesterday. The pandemic's impacts will undo years of socio-economic development for some countries, the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) said in a briefing released alongside its annual index measuring peace levels around the world. "The worst is still to come," said Steve Killelea, head of the Australia-based IEP, which expects to see most of the peace indicators it measures fall for several years. "The countries which are going to suffer the most are those which are currently fragile because they are the ones which generally have higher levels of food insecurity, the governments are politically less stable and economies are less robust."

Lockdowns to prevent the spread of the virus have hit economies, with the International Labour Organization estimating some 200 million would lose their jobs and the World Bank predicting the global economy will shrink by 5% in 2020. Analysts predict it will take five years for world economies to recover back to their 2019 levels, said Killelea. Heavily-indebted countries may struggle to find cash to rebuild their economies after the coronavirus, increasing instability, riots and violence, IEP's analysis found. Many states are also likely to cut overseas aid which will further stress fragile and conflict-torn countries, such as Liberia, Afghanistan, Burundi and South Sudan, and risks worsening humanitarian crises, it said.

Climate change and natural disasters also pose a growing threat to peace, said the IEP, which found global peacefulness has deteriorated worldwide over

the past year. Global peacefulness has declined 2.5% since 2008, found the index, which gives countries a peace score of between 1 and 5, based on 23 indicators measuring levels of conflicts, societal safety and militarization. Vidya Diwakar, a researcher at the Overseas Development Institute think-tank, predicted the impact of the pandemic would be felt beyond fragile states, driving poverty and hunger, which



Virus measures deepen food crisis

can trigger unrest, in many countries. "With such a crisis of this sort which affects so many dimensions ... there are likely to be long-term impacts," she said.

N Koreans 'starving'

Food insecurity in North Korea is deepening and some people are "starving" after it closed the border with China and took other steps against COVID-19, a UN rights expert said Tuesday. The hermetic totalitarian state, which has yet to confirm a single case of the novel coronavirus, introduced a range of other measures to try and prevent an outbreak. Tomas Ojea Quintana, the United Nations special rapporteur on

human rights in the country, called for urgent action from Pyongyang and the international community to relieve the suffering. "Lack of food had a devastating impact in the DPRK (Democratic People's Republic of Korea) in the 1990s, and prospects of a further deepening of food shortages and widespread food insecurity are alarming," he said. Hundreds of thousands are believed to have died during a famine in the mid to late 1990s, a period known as the "Arduous March" in the North. Before the coronavirus crisis, more than 40 percent of people in North Korea were already considered food insecure, with many suffering malnutrition.

'Irreversible damage'

One in five children under the age of five in the country are stunted, World Food Program spokeswoman Elisabeth Byrs told a virtual briefing on Tuesday. "Malnutrition on this scale means irreversible damage is being done to hundreds of thousands of children," she said. The decision five months ago to close the border with China, and putting thousands into isolation, are exacerbating the situation, said Quintana - an independent expert who does not speak on behalf of the UN but who reports his findings to it. North Korea's trade with China in March and April this year dropped by more than 90 percent, leaving many living in the border areas with no income, he said. "There have been reports of an increase of homeless people in large cities, including kotjebi (street children), and medicine prices have reportedly skyrocketed," his statement said. "An increasing number of families eat only twice a day, or eat only corn, and some are starving," it said.

Virus-related alerts

Meanwhile, a new version of Google's mapping service being rolled out will display pandemic-related transit alerts and let people know when buses or trains might be crowded. Updated versions of the free app for smartphones powered by Apple or Google-backed Android software will also let drivers know about COVID-19 checkpoints or restrictions on their routes. "We're introducing features to help you easily find important information if you need to venture out, whether it's by car or public transportation," Google Maps product management director Ramesh Nagarajan said in a blog post. Alerts about COVID-19 checkpoint notifications are to begin with crossings between the US and Canada or Mexico. When people use Maps for trips by public transit, Google will provide available information regarding whether schedules are limited; masks must be worn, or crowds are expected.

"Having this information before and during your trip is critical for both essential workers who need to safely navigate to work and will become more important for everyone as countries around the world begin to reopen," Nagarajan said. The transit alerts are rolling out in Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Britain, Colombia, France, India, Mexico, Netherlands, Spain, Thailand, and the US where information from local transit agencies is available. People using Maps to navigate to medical facilities or COVID-19 testing centers will be shown reminders to verify eligibility and guidelines to avoid being turned away, according to Nagarajan. Alerts for those traveling to medical facilities will be available in Indonesia, Israel, the Philippines, South Korea, and the US starting this week. — Agencies

Syrians fear hunger as devaluation sparks protests

BEIRUT: Umm Ahmed and her family have survived years of war, but now the mother of five is terrified uncontrolled devaluation of the Syrian pound will prevent her from feeding her children. "Since the war started, we've tasted all sorts of suffering," said the 39-year-old, displaced three times by fighting in the rebel stronghold of Idlib. "I think hunger will be among the next."

The value of the Syrian pound has plummeted with dizzying speed in recent days on the informal market, sending prices skyrocketing, shuttering shops, and sparking unprecedented protests. Umm Ahmed said she was so alarmed she was considering buying flour in bulk to start hoarding supplies. "If the pound continues to collapse like this, we are facing a huge famine," said Umm Ahmed, who is relying on dwindling savings as her husband struggles to help with odd jobs.

"We sold some land we inherited and we have been living off that but I don't think it will last long with these obscene price hikes," she said in the town of Binnish. In Idlib, the increase in the price of bread has sparked protests against Hayat Tahrir al-Sham jihadists in charge of the region of three million people—around half displaced by the conflict and many dependent on aid. Some shops have closed, an AFP correspondent reported. Syria's economy has been battered by nine years of war, compounded by a financial crisis in neighboring Lebanon, which had served as a conduit for dollars into government-held areas under international sanctions.

But in recent days the value of the Syrian pound on the black market has started to tumble even faster from one record to the next. From Sat-



BINNISH, Syria: A merchant displays Syrian pound notes at a shop in this town in Syria's north-western Idlib province on Tuesday. — AFP

urday to Monday alone, the exchange rate soared from 2,300 to more than 3,000 pounds to the dollar, more than four times the official rate of around 700. It hovered close to 3,000 yesterday. Before the conflict, it stood at 47.

Analysts say the recent spike is likely due to worries ahead of the introduction of new US sanctions from June 15, and the sudden fall from grace of tycoon and cousin of the president, Rami Makhlouf, which has set other top businessmen on edge. Prices have risen across the country, though the Turkish lira is used in some parts of the rebel-held north. The government has blamed the unofficial devaluation on US sanctions, and "manipulation" of the exchange rate.

But the rapid deterioration has sparked unprecedented criticism in government-held areas, including in the southern city of Sweida, where dozens have demonstrated for three days since Sunday, boldly chanting against the president. "Down with Bashar al-Assad," a video carried by a local news outlet showed them chanting. "Revolution, freedom, social justice," they shouted in

slogans reminiscent of the 2011 uprising whose repression sparked the civil war that has killed more than 380,000 people.

In the capital Damascus, one lawmaker said Sunday that part of the blame for the unofficial devaluation lay with the "wrong policies practised by the government". Another demanded action from the central bank, which increased the official exchange rate from 434 to 700 in March, but has since maintained that peg.

In Damascus, 52-year-old Lamees al-Sheikh said she had started buying only the cheapest vegetables. "Prices are through the roof. Every day... it's more expensive than the day before," the mother of five told AFP by phone. "I'm scared one day I'll... come back home empty handed." In a country where the vast majority lives in poverty, the World Food Program says food prices have risen by 133 percent since May 2019. "WFP estimates that 9.3 million Syrians are food insecure more than ever recorded," spokeswoman Jessica Lawson said. — AFP

US dictionary to change definition of 'racism'

NEW YORK: The American reference dictionary Merriam-Webster will change its definition of the word racism at the suggestion of a young black woman, who wanted it to better reflect the oppression of people of color. Kennedy Mitchum, a recent graduate of Drake University in Iowa, contacted Merriam-Webster, which has published its dictionaries since 1847, to propose updating the term. "I basically told them that they need to include that there's a systematic oppression upon a group of people," she told the local CBS affiliate KMOV. "It's not just, 'Oh, I don't like someone.'" Merriam-Webster's editorial manager Peter Sokolowski confirmed to AFP that the definition would be modified after Mitchum's request.

The dictionary currently offers three definitions of racism, and Sokolowski said that the second definition touches on Mitchum's point — but that "we will make that even more clear in our next release". In the current version of the second definition, racism is "a doctrine or political program based on the assumption of racism and designed to execute its principles," and "a political or social system founded on racism." "This is the kind of continuous revision that is part of the work of keeping the dictionary up to date, based on rigorous criteria and research we employ in order to describe the language as it is actually used," Sokolowski said.

One of the dictionary's editors told Mitchum that the definitions of other words "related to racism or have racial connotations" would also be updated, without specifying which ones. "We apologize for the harm and offense we have caused in failing to address this issue sooner," the editor wrote, according to a message published by Drake University and retweeted by Mitchum. The Merriam-Webster site, where the definitions are available for free, had nearly 50 million unique visitors in May, according to the SimilarWeb site. Merriam-Webster's Twitter account has also become a viral hit in recent years, with Buzzfeed calling it "the sassiest dictionary on Twitter". — AFP