

International

Seoul closes bars and clubs over fears of virus 2nd wave

'Carelessness can lead to an explosion in infections'

SEOUL: South Korea's capital has ordered the closure of all clubs and bars after a burst of new cases sparked fears of a second coronavirus wave, and President Moon Jae-in urged the public to remain vigilant. The nation has been held up as a global model in how to curb the virus, but the order from the Seoul mayor on Saturday followed a new infection cluster in Itaewon, one of the city's busiest nightlife districts. More than 50 cases so far have been linked to a 29-year-old man who tested positive after spending time at five clubs and bars in Itaewon last weekend. "Carelessness can lead to an explosion in infections," said Seoul mayor Park Won-soon, adding the order will remain in effect indefinitely.

Gyeonggi province - which surrounds Seoul with a population of around 12 million people - also ordered more than 5,700 entertainment facilities to suspend operations for two weeks starting Sunday. With around 7,200 people estimated to have visited the five establishments, health authorities have warned of a further spike in infections and have asked those who went to any of the venues to get tested. Of the 34 new infections reported on Sunday, 24 were tied to the Itaewon cluster, according to the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"We cannot but feel sorry to see the emergence of the new infection cluster surrounding the Itaewon clubs," KCDC director Jeong Eun-kyeong

told reporters. The spike in new infections came as everyday life in South Korea was slowly returning to normal, with the government relaxing social distancing rules last Wednesday. President Moon said Sunday the new cluster had "raised awareness that even during the stabilisation phase, similar situations can arise again anytime".

A burst of new cases sparks fears

er lower our guard regarding epidemic prevention," he added. Moon has enjoyed growing public support on the back of his government's handling of the virus, which led to a landslide victory for his ruling party at last month's parliamentary elections. The usually bustling streets of Itaewon were largely empty on Sunday afternoon, with bars and clubs fronting signs reading "Temporarily closed for business" or "Prevention of assembly".

"I think this incident can happen anywhere, not only in Itaewon," said Kim Jae-sung, a chef at a neighborhood restaurant. "What is most important is one's of social distancing, avoiding enclosed places and being aware so that incidents like this won't happen again," he told AFP. Lee Seung-wook, a 22-year-old restaurant worker, added: "We hope

'Not over'

"It's not over until it's over," Moon said during a speech marking his third anniversary of taking office. "While keeping enhanced alertness till the end, we must nev-



SEOUL: A man wearing a facemask walks in the popular nightlife district of Itaewon yesterday. — AFP

customers will be more co-operative when we ask for their names for the visiting records since we all need to work together."

The country endured one of the worst early outbreaks of the disease outside mainland China, and while it never imposed a compulsory lockdown, strict social distancing had been widely observed since

March. But it appears to have brought its outbreak under control thanks to an extensive "trace, test and treat" program that has drawn widespread praise. Facilities such as museums and churches have reopened and some professional sports - including baseball and soccer - have started new seasons, while schools are set to re-open starting next week. — AFP

Iraq's new govt reaches out to Oct protesters

BAGHDAD: Iraq's new government promised Saturday to release demonstrators arrested during mass protests that erupted in October and pledged justice and compensation to relatives of over 550 people killed during that unrest. The announcement was made in a televised address following Prime Minister Mustafa Kadhemi's first cabinet meeting. Kadhemi, who with 15 of his proposed 22 ministers won the confidence of Parliament on Wednesday evening, promised "the truth about everything that happened" during the months-long protests.

He vowed to "hold to account all those who shed Iraqi blood". Kadhemi was Iraq's spy chief when the protests broke out and the address to the nation comes as calls spread on social media for renewed demonstrations yesterday. The government of his predecessor Adel Abdel Mahdi had since October repeatedly said it could not find the "unidentified gunmen" who fired on protesters who took to the streets to demand the overhaul of the political system.

At the start of the protests that would become the largest and bloodiest social movement in Iraq's recent history, many demonstrators carried portraits of General Abdulwahab al-Saadi - a highly popular figure in the military campaign to dislodge the Islamic State from Mosul in 2017. He had been dismissed by Abdel Mahdi in September.

Kadhemi on Saturday reinstated the general as the head of counter-terrorism, putting him back in charge of units created and armed by the Americans. The new Iraqi premier has long been seen as Washington's man in Baghdad, but he has also forged close ties with America's arch-foe Iran. Kadhemi also called on parliament to adopt a new electoral law needed for early elections that had been promised by his predecessor.

The new government had presented itself as a "transitional" cabinet on Wednesday evening. It rescinded a decision taken by the outgoing government just before it stepped down that blocked all state spending, including civil servants' salaries and pension payments - relied on by one in five Iraqis. Pensions will be paid out in the coming days, Kadhemi promised. But an implosion of oil prices amid the coronavirus pandemic indicates that Iraq will have little option but to impose austerity policies that could give rise to renewed protests. — AFP



NASIRIYAH, Iraq: Iraqi protesters gather amid clashes with security forces following an anti-government demonstration in this southern city in Dhi Qar province yesterday. — AFP

Pakistanis crowd markets as virus lockdown eased

ISLAMABAD: Pakistanis crowded markets on Saturday after a nationwide coronavirus lockdown was eased, despite the country declaring its second highest daily infection toll. Prime Minister Imran Khan has allowed businesses to reopen in phases from the weekend, citing the economic havoc the virus restrictions have wreaked on the improvised nation. In the garrison city of Rawalpindi, thousands of shoppers were preparing for Eid, which follows the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, with many flouting social distancing rules and advice to wear masks.

In the southern port city of Karachi shopkeepers set out their wares of shoes, clothes, bangles and fabrics, while in the capital Islamabad shoppers



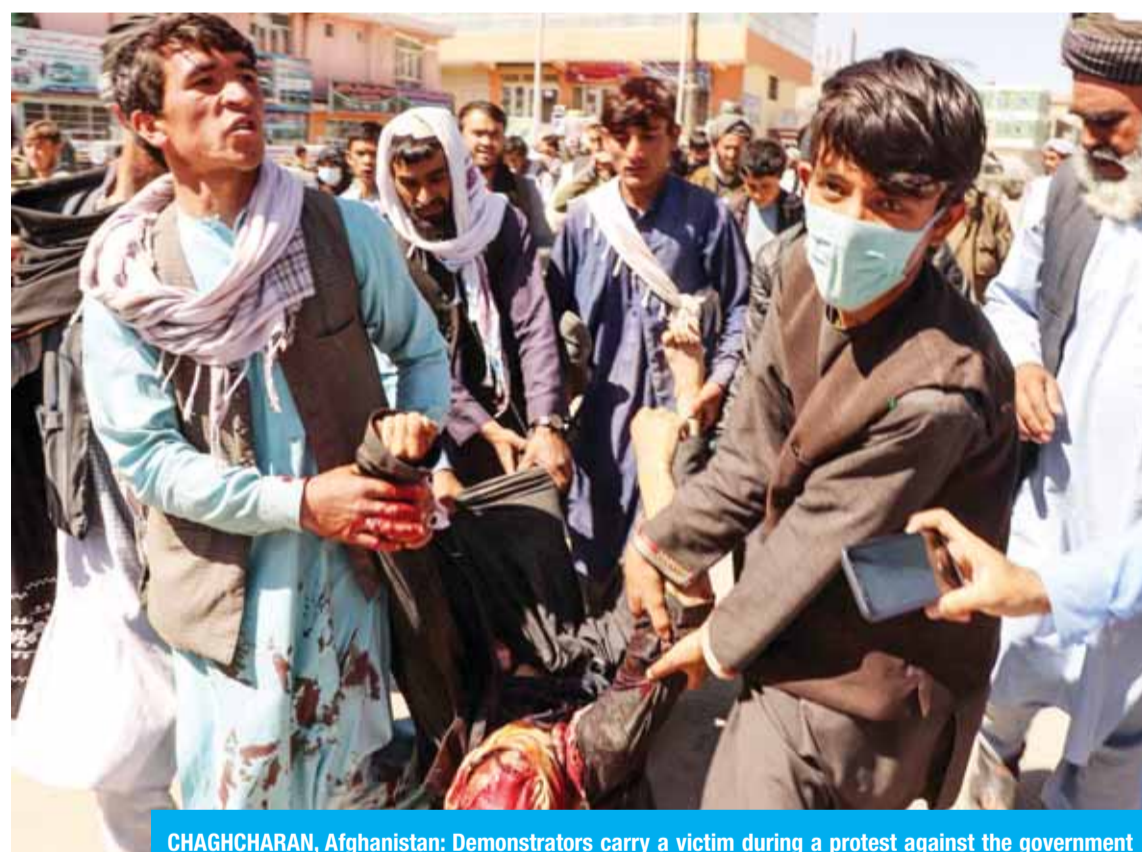
QUETTA: People shop for shoes after the government eased a nationwide lockdown imposed as a preventive measure against the coronavirus on Saturday. — AFP

stood in tightly-packed queues as they waited for stores to open. Similar scenes were played out in Lahore, Quetta and Peshawar. Omar Shirazi, a banker shopping for clothes with his daughter in Rawalpindi, welcomed the move. "Eid is approach-

ing," he said. "We have to buy new garments for our children. It's the responsibility of people to comply with rules and wear safety gear."

Tehmina Sattar, who was shopping with her sister and sons, was more cautious. "We are happy with this decision but at the same time I have a fear in my heart that if this disease spreads it could be devastating. People here are not taking preventative measures." The country's Information Minister Shibli Faraz warned Saturday that the lockdown on businesses would be reimposed if safety guidelines were not followed, after authorities reported more than 1,600 new cases in the past 24 hours.

Infections have been rising steadily as testing has increased, with more than 27,000 cases and more than 600 deaths recorded in the nation of over 210 million. The easing comes as many across the country have openly ignored restrictions on gatherings in public during the past month, especially during the evenings as people celebrate Ramadan. Schools will remain closed until mid-July however, while there are no plans to restart public transportation or domestic flights. — AFP



CHAGHCHARAN, Afghanistan: Demonstrators carry a victim during a protest against the government outside the governor's office following a clash in Firozkoh in Ghor province on Saturday. — AFP

Six killed in clashes at Afghan food aid event

HERAT: Two policemen and four other people were killed in Afghanistan on Saturday after a deadly clash at a public food donation in central Ghor province, officials said. Hundreds of people had gathered outside the governor's office in the provincial capital Firozkoh, where a Qatari group was distributing aid. Some of those who had queued up to receive aid staged a protest against what they saw as "unjust distribution of food items to poor families," Abdul Rahman Akshar, the deputy head of Ghor's provincial council said.

He said that many protesters tried to barge into the governor's office, leading to clashes between them and police present at the site. Officials blamed the protesters for the ensuing violence that left six people dead. "The protesters opened fire on the police," the provincial governor's spokesman Aref Haber said. "Four civilians, including an employee of a local radio and two policemen were killed," he

said, adding that 19 people were also wounded. He said the protesters also beat security personnel, and an investigation into the incident was underway.

The interior ministry confirmed the death toll in a statement, saying "some illegal armed men in the mob attacked the government building", which prompted police to fire into the air to disperse the crowd. Afghan Vice President Amrullah Saleh said the attack was "shocking" and announced that the "government was seriously investigating the incident" in a Facebook post. But the chief of the Afghanistan Human Rights Commission Shaharzar Akbar wrote on Twitter that there were "worrying reports of police firing at protesters in Ghor". She said this was "completely unacceptable" and a team from the commission was looking into the incident.

The aid group was distributing food to about 1,000 local families when the violence erupted. Food drives are a common practice in the country during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Afghanistan is also battling a growing coronavirus outbreak that has exacerbated problems with food access in the impoverished country. In recent weeks authorities have distributed bread in Kabul and other parts of the country since the government imposed a lockdown. Afghanistan's health ministry has so far reported 4,333 cases of COVID-19 and 115 deaths. — AFP

Nepal protests new Indian road through disputed territory

KATHMANDU: Nepal protested India's inauguration of a new road to China that passes through territory claimed by Kathmandu on Saturday, with police arresting dozens demonstrating close to India's embassy. Indian defense minister Rajnath Singh on Friday inaugurated via video link the 80-kilometre (50 miles) long road from Ghatiabagarh in northern Uttarakhand state to the Lipu Lekh pass high in the Himalaya. The pass is claimed by Nepal based on an 1816 treaty that defines its western border with India.

Kathmandu also claims the adjoining and strategic Kalapani as a part of its territory, although Indian troops have been deployed there since New Delhi fought a war with China in 1962. Last year New Delhi published a new map that showed Kalapani within its borders, a move protested by Kathmandu. Nepal's foreign ministry condemned India's "unilateral act" that "runs against the understanding reached between the two countries... that a solution to boundary issues would be sought through negotiations."

It called on India "to refrain from carrying out any activity inside" in the territory. Police said at least 38 people were detained as they gathered outside the Indian embassy in Kathmandu and other areas to protest the inauguration of the road. A nationwide coronavirus lockdown has been imposed in Nepal. Nepal protested to India and China in 2015 when the two countries issued a joint statement listing the Lipu Lekh pass as a bilateral trade route. The hashtag #backoffindia was trending on Twitter in Nepal Saturday. — AFP



KATHMANDU: Police detain demonstrators during a protest against India's newly inaugurated link road to the Chinese border in front of the parliament yesterday. — AFP