

International

Malaysia's leader faces calls to quit after failed bid for emergency rule

King rejected Muhyiddin's request for emergency

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin faced calls to resign yesterday as doubts swirled over the support that he commands, after the king rejected his request to declare a state of emergency to fight the coronavirus epidemic. Muhyiddin had requested emergency rule amid a fresh spike in infections in Malaysia and a global pandemic that has battered the economy. But critics accused him of using it as a pretext to suspend parliament and avoid a test of his razor-thin parliamentary majority.

King Al-Sultan Abdullah's refusal is seen further eroding Muhyiddin's grip on power, a month after opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim said he has majority support in parliament, including from defectors from the ruling alliance, to form a new government. Turning down Muhyiddin's request on Sunday, the king also asked politicians to end any politicking that could destabilise a government that he said has handled the pandemic well, and stressed the importance of the 2021 budget scheduled to be set before parliament on Nov. 6.

But leaders of other parties in Muhyiddin's coalition and the opposition criticized his move to seek emergency powers and called on him to step down after the bid failed. "Thankfully, His Majesty the King was not influenced by the political game that could drag the country into more critical territory,"

said Ahmad Puad Zarkashi, a senior leader in the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) - the largest party in the ruling coalition - said in a post on Facebook. "The people's wellbeing is more important. By right, Muhyiddin should step down," Ahmad Puad said.

Opposition lawmaker Wong Chen said Muhyiddin's "malicious" proposal was rightfully rejected by the king, and that the premier should resign or fire ministers who proposed the emergency. The Southeast Asia nation was plunged into political instability in late February following the resignation of the previous prime minister, veteran politician Mahathir Mohamad, after his coalition broke apart, and former ally Muhyiddin forged a new alliance with UMNO to become prime minister.

Within weeks, Muhyiddin was faced with the coronavirus crisis, but the new ruling coalition is also beset with infighting, with UMNO seeking to exert more influence. And some of the UMNO's corruption tainted leaders, notably former prime minister Najib Razak, have been trying to revive their political fortunes. Some in UMNO have called for polls to resolve the crisis, but others are opposed to holding an election due to the pandemic.

In response to speculation, Ismail Sabri, senior minister of security, said a dissolution of parliament that would lead to elections was not discussed in a

Coalition partners, opposition call for PM to step down



KUALA LUMPUR: A couple looks at the skyline of the Malaysian capital on Sunday. —AFP

special cabinet meeting held yesterday. The country's politicians, however, could be influenced by the king's call to avoid politicking, and put the nation's needs first, analysts said. "The King appears to be sending a signal that the government of the day will

hold, and that the Budget should be passed, and there should not be any political changes, at least for the time being," Shazwan Mustafa Kamal, a senior associate with political and policy risk consultancy Vriens & Partners, said. —Reuters

Anger over Italy's COVID rules; curfews enforced around Europe

ROME: Anger was growing in Italy yesterday over harsh new coronavirus restrictions brought in to "save Christmas", while other hard-hit countries enforced curfews in a bid to avoid fresh national lockdowns. Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte's decision to close restaurants and bars from 6:00 pm and shut all theatres, cinemas and gyms for a month was widely criticized, even as scientists questioned whether it would be enough to stop the virus.

"These restrictions will be the end of us," said Giuseppe Tonon, 70, the owner of a restaurant in Oderzo, a small village in northeastern Italy. "We're not in a city centre, we're in the provinces. Our customers come in the evening or during the weekend," he told AFP after a photograph of him, slumped in despair at the news, went viral on social media.

Countries across Europe are seeing dramatic spikes in cases, and governments are taking drastic action. Spain imposed a new national state of emergency and overnight curfews, while France

set a daily record of more than 50,000 cases and extended an overnight curfew to cover areas home to around 46 million people. COVID-19 has now claimed the lives of 1.1 million people and infected more than 43 million globally.

The United States-still the worst-hit country-smashed its own record for new daily cases this weekend, pushing the issue up the agenda in the nation's presidential election campaign. Challenger Joe Biden accused President Donald Trump's administration of waving "the white flag of defeat" after a senior official conceded the government was not going to control the pandemic. But the battle was being won elsewhere: Australia's second biggest city Melbourne registered no new cases yesterday, and was set to exit lockdown this week after nearly four months of onerous restrictions.

'The end of us'

Conte told Italy he hoped the unpopular new restrictions, which deal a severe blow to sectors already on their knees after a national lockdown this spring, "will allow us to be more relaxed by Christmas", though he warned "hugging and partying" would still be out of the question. "Stop! We've brought in a decree to save you!" a cartoon Conte told a suicidal Father Christmas on the Corriere della Sera's front-page. Restaurant and bar owners were not laughing. The early closing times mean Italy's bustling aperitivo hour is gone, as are dinners out. Famed Italian conductor

aware of it," the spokeswoman said in a statement, adding that Facebook had "more work to do".

Facebook's last transparency report for the six months to December 2019, showed that Pakistan was the source of the second highest number of requests to curb content after Russia. A source with direct knowledge of the issue at Facebook told Reuters that the most requests for the removal of content relating to Islam came from Pakistan, exceeding other Muslim-majority countries. Facebook traditionally complies, as not doing so would be to break Pakistan's laws, the source said, adding that authorities would often send dozens of links at a time and demand they be taken down.

'Attacking Islam'

In his letter, Khan also referred to the situation in France, where, he said, Islam was being associated with terrorism. Khan said Macron had "attacked Islam" by encouraging the display of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad. Khan's comments came after Macron paid tribute to a French history teacher beheaded by an Islamist radical who wanted to avenge the use of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad in a class on freedom of expression.

Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi said the French ambassador in Islamabad had been summoned to be given a diplomatic protest against Macron's "irresponsible remarks". Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan also criticized Macron, saying last week the French president needed mental help over his attitude towards Muslims. France then recalled its ambassador to Turkey. Pakistan and Turkey share strong ties, while Khan and Erdogan have developed a

country reported 337 new deaths and 5,960 new cases over the past 24 hours. A banner on state TV said that amounted to a death every four minutes. Authorities have complained of poor social distancing, and Deputy Health Minister Iraj Harirchi said last week the death count could soon rise to 600 a day if Iranians fail to respect health protocols.

The closure of schools, mosques, shops, restaurants and other public institutions in Tehran, that was due to end yesterday, would now be extended until Nov. 20, state TV reported. "Extreme measures and limitations" will be imposed for one week in at least 43 counties where the infection rates have been alarming, the TV report added, citing officials. It added that 21 one of



TURIN: Taxi drivers stand next to taxis parked on Piazza Castello yesterday during a strike to protest against COVID-19 restrictions. —AFP

Riccardo Muti appealed publicly to the prime minister, saying closing down the arts would also "harm health".

"Defining... theatre and music as 'superfluous', as some elements of the government have, is ignorant, uncultured and insensitive," he said. Italy, the first European country to be hit hard by the pandemic, on Sunday registered 21,273 new cases. Regional heads had warned a new decree with strict measures would fuel social tensions, after street clashes in Naples and Rome last week. The World Health Organization's Italian government adviser Walter Ricciardi said it also may "not be enough" to stop the virus spreading. —AFP



LAHORE: Traders shout slogans during a protest following French President Emmanuel Macron's comments over the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) caricatures yesterday. —AFP

close relationship - particularly on the topic of Islamophobia. Khan's letter to Facebook and comments on Macron come as he faces pressure from a newly formed coalition of opposition parties seeking to oust him. The cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad, first published in 2005 by Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten, have long been a sensitive topic among Muslims, stirring protests in Pakistan and elsewhere. Tens of thousands of people protested in Pakistan last month when the cartoons were republished by the French satirical weekly Charlie Hebdo.

Khan's government has subjected a number of social media apps to intense scrutiny and banned some for content authorities deemed obscene or immoral. —Reuters

Iran's 31 provinces were on a coronavirus red alert.

Tehran has blamed U.S. sanctions for hampering its efforts to tackle the outbreak. Washington, accusing Iran of "incompetent and deadly governance", has refused to lift sanctions that were reimposed after 2018 when Trump exited Iran's 2015 nuclear deal with six powers. Yesterday's data took Iran's total death toll to 32,953 and the number of identified cases to 574,856, Health Ministry spokeswoman Sima Sadat Lari said. Some experts have doubted the accuracy of Iran's official coronavirus tolls. A report by the Iranian parliament's research centre in April suggested that the coronavirus tolls might be almost twice as many as those announced by the ministry. —Reuters

News in brief

Pompeo in India over 'threats'

NEW DELHI: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo arrived in New Delhi yesterday, kicking off a four-country Asia tour that he has said will focus on the "threats" posed by China. Joined by Defense Secretary Mark Esper for the two-day visit, Pompeo will hold top-level talks following a spike in tensions between India and China since a deadly border clash in June. India has sought US cold weather equipment as the slowdown goes into the freezing Himalayan winter and officials said this could be raised when Pompeo and Esper meet India's External Affairs Minister Subrahmanya Jaishankar and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh. The world's two biggest democracies are expected to sign an agreement on sharing geo-spatial intelligence, paving the way for the United States to ship sophisticated missile technology, officials said. —AFP

Philippine envoy ordered home

MANILA: The Philippines ordered its ambassador to Brazil to return home yesterday after video footage showed her "mistreating" a Filipino domestic helper. Marichu Mauro, who was posted to Brazil in 2018 and also had jurisdiction over Colombia, Guyana, Suriname and Venezuela, was under investigation, the foreign ministry said. "The Department of Foreign Affairs has instructed the Philippine Ambassador to Brazil to return home immediately following release of video footages showing her berating and mistreating her household staff," the statement said. The announcement came after Brazil's GloboNews broadcast security camera footage which they said showed Mauro repeatedly assaulting a female member of her household staff. GloboNews said the woman worked at the ambassador's official residence in the Brazilian capital of Brasilia. The images-dated from March to October-were used as evidence in a complaint lodged against Mauro in late August, it said. —AFP

Iraqi protesters, police clash

BAGHDAD: Dozens of Iraqi protesters again clashed with security forces in Baghdad yesterday, a day after a rally marked the first anniversary of the start of nationwide mass anti-government demonstrations. Police fired stun grenades and tear gas at protesters who were burning tyres and hurling rocks on the strategic Al-Jumhuriyah bridge across the Tigris River leading to the highly-fortified Green Zone, an AFP photographer reported. The bridge, barricaded by towering concrete walls, separates the Green Zone from Tahrir Square, the epicenter of the old and new demonstrations. The highly-secure Green Zone, where government offices, parliament and the US embassy are located, is off-limits to ordinary Iraqi citizens. In a repeat of last year's demonstrations, rallies were also held in Shiite Muslim-dominated southern towns and cities. —AFP

Nigeria struggles with unrest

LAGOS: Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari has appealed for "peace" as authorities struggled to halt looting across the country, the latest in a wave of unrest sweeping Africa's most populous nation. A statement from the presidency said Buhari backed a judicial inquiry in Lagos "to give justice to peaceful protesters who lost their lives, security men who were murdered" and those who lost property in days of violence. The leader "appealed to the people all over the country to maintain peace and brotherhood as the machinery of the government and the wheel of justice turn against the perpetrators", it said. Peaceful demonstrations against police brutality erupted in Nigeria on October 8 and quickly snowballed into one of the biggest challenges to the ruling elite in decades. —AFP

Iran reports COVID-19 death every 4 minutes

DUBAI: Iran extended COVID-19 curbs in Tehran and across the country yesterday as health authorities said they were recording a death from the virus every four minutes. Some hospitals had run out of beds to treat new patients, the head of the national coronavirus task-force told state TV. "Our doctors and nurses are tired. I urge everyone to respect the protocols," Alireza Zali said.

The health ministry in the Middle East's hardest-hit