



People smugglers reap billions selling 'big American dream'

India locks down capital to battle virus as US hits vaccine milestone

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MOSCOW: Czech diplomats and their family members leave the grounds of the country's embassy in Moscow yesterday. —AFP

Russia moves Navalny to prison hospital

Kremlin says expulsion of diplomats from Prague 'provocative'

MOSCOW: Russia's penitentiary service yesterday said it was transferring ailing Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny to prison hospital, as the EU warned it would hold Moscow "responsible" for the state of his health. The United States on Sunday threatened Russia with "consequences" if President Vladimir Putin's major domestic opponent—who launched a hunger strike three weeks ago—dies in jail, with Navalny's private doctors warning at the weekend he could pass away at "any minute".

Russia's prison authorities, which have barred Navalny's own medical team from visiting him, said its doctors had decided to move him to a medical facility on the premises of another penal colony outside Moscow. But the authorities insisted the anti-corruption campaigner's condition was "satisfactory", and said he was taking vitamin supplements as part of medical treatment. Fears over Navalny's fate have added more fuel to soaring tensions between Moscow and the West over a build-up of Russian troops along the border with Ukraine and a spiraling diplomatic row with EU member

state the Czech Republic. EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said the bloc held the Russian authorities "responsible for the health situation of Mr Navalny" as foreign ministers from its 27 nations held virtual talks.

Borrell called Navalny's condition "very worrisome" and repeated demands that Moscow allows his chosen team of doctors to inspect him. Lithuania's Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis pushed further, saying the bloc should prepare "a humanitarian mission" to fly him out of Russia for treatment.

"If the international community does not respond, the regime's opposition leader will be sent silently to his death," Landsbergis said. The Kremlin dismissed the outcry from foreign leaders over Navalny's condition. "The health of convicts in the Russia Federation cannot and should not be a topic concerning them," said Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov.

Navalny, 44, was arrested in Russia in January after returning from treatment in Germany for a near-fatal nerve agent poisoning he says was carried out by

Moscow—accusations denied by Putin's administration. Sentenced to two-and-a-half years in prison for embezzlement, he began a hunger strike on March 31 demanding medical treatment for back pain and numbness to his hands and legs.

The EU in October sanctioned six Russian officials over the Novichok nerve agent attack on Navalny, and in February sanctioned another four individuals over his arrest and sentencing.

France's Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said Sunday that those sanctions could be expanded. Navalny's supporters have called for a major protest across Russia on Wednesday to demand his release, hours after a state-of-the-nation address by Putin. Russian police—who detained thousands during earlier protests over Navalny's jailing—warned people not to demonstrate, saying officers would take "all necessary measures to maintain law and order".

Meanwhile, the Kremlin yesterday denounced the "provocative and unfriendly" expulsion of 18 Russian

diplomats from the Czech Republic who were accused by authorities in Prague of spying. "We categorically do not agree with these conclusions," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters, describing the Czech move as "provocative and unfriendly". Czech authorities on Saturday said they would expel the diplomats identified by local intelligence as secret agents of Russian security services who are suspected of involvement in a 2014 blast that killed two people.

Russia responded on Sunday by announcing 20 employees of the Czech embassy in Moscow "persona non grata" and saying they had to leave the country before the end of yesterday. The expulsions were announced after the Czech ambassador in Moscow, Vitezslav Pivonka, had been summoned by the Russian foreign ministry. Also yesterday, the ministry's spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said that the "hastily fabricated" accusations were aimed at distracting from "accumulated problems in EU countries and in the West in general". —AFP

Over 300 rebels, five soldiers killed in Chad

N'DJAMENA, Chad: The Chadian army said yesterday it had killed 300 rebels in the north of the country at the weekend, adding that it had lost five of its soldiers. A heavily armed rebel group had launched a raid from its rear base in Libya on April 11, the same day as Chad's presidential election that is expected to see the incumbent Idriss Deby Itno returned to power. The raid by the Front for Change and Concord in Chad (FACT) has since resulted in "more than 300 rebels neutralized" and claimed the lives of five government troops, army spokesman General Azem Bermandoa Agouma said.

Bermandoa said 36 soldiers had been wounded in fighting on Saturday and 150 rebels taken prisoner, including three senior members. The government has said that the rebel offensive in the provinces of Tibesti and Kanem was over. Fighting resumed late Sunday afternoon, General Bermandoa said, adding however that calm had returned to the area.

FACT, for its part, said in a statement on Sunday that it had "liberated" the Kanem region that saw clashes on Saturday. Bermandoa said 24 vehicles had been seized and that mopping-up operations were ongoing to "track down the last ones fleeing".

Tanks were deployed in the main roads of the Chadian capital N'Djamena, an AFP journalist reported. The Tibesti

mountains near the Libyan frontier frequently see fighting between rebels and the army, as well as in the northeast bordering Sudan. French air strikes were needed to stop an incursion there in February 2019.

The Union of Resistance Forces (UFR), led by Deby's nephew Timan Erdimi, had entered Chad from Libya in columns of pick-up trucks. The UFR said Sunday that it supported FACT, but without saying whether its fighters took part Saturday's clash. The UFR was allied with Chadian rebels in 2008 when they launched a coup attempt, stopped at the gates of the presidential palace by a French military intervention.

Deby assured re-election

FACT is based in Libya, where it has a non-aggression pact with Khalifa Haftar, a military strongman who controls much of the country's east. It is mainly made up of the Saharan Goran people, while the UFR is majority Zaghawa, the president's ethnic group.

The US embassy in N'Djamena on Saturday ordered non-essential personnel to leave the country, warning of possible violence in the capital. Britain also urged its nationals to leave the country.

But Chadian Foreign Minister Amine Abba Sidick appealed for calm, saying: "The situation is not worrying. The military situation is well under the control of the Chadian army."

Meanwhile vote-counting was continuing from the April 11 election in which Deby is assured victory after sidelining his main rivals. Deby, who has ruled the former French colony with an iron fist for 30 years, campaigned on security issues in the troubled region. Preliminary results will not be announced until April 25. —AFP

Authorities have not yet provided a reason for Sunday's derailment. A security source told AFP the driver and other rail officials had been detained for questioning. The ministry said 14 people who sustained minor injuries were released from a hospital close to the accident site.

Egyptian rail disasters are generally attributed to poor infrastructure and maintenance. At least 20 people died and 199 were injured last month in a train crash in the country's south, according to the latest official toll, which authorities have revised several times. The prosecution has alleged that the driver of one train and his assistant had both left the driver's cabin when it crashed into another train.

Transport Minister Kamel el-Wazir — a former general named to the post after a deadly 2019 train collision — blamed the March crash on human error. "We have a problem with the human element," he told a TV talk show, where he pledged to put in place an automated network by 2024.

The African Development Bank announced earlier this month a \$170 million loan to improve safety on Egypt's rail network. The bank said the money would be used "to enhance operational safety and to increase network capacity on national rail lines". "The planned



This image made available courtesy of the Chadian Army Sunday shows alleged rebel soldiers belonging to the FACT sitting in the sand after having been captured following clashes with the Chadian army in Nyze, 50km North east of Ziguaye. —AFP



People gather by an overturned train carriage at the scene of a railway accident in the city of Toukh in Egypt's central Nile Delta province of Qalyubiya Sunday. —AFP

upgrades are expected to benefit low-income Egyptians, about 40 percent of the population, who rely on trains as an affordable mode of transport," it said in a statement.

One of the country's deadliest train crashes came in 2002, when 373 people died as a fire ripped through a crowded train south of Cairo. —AFP

Syria court gets 1st applications for presidential vote

DAMASCUS: A Syrian court yesterday started receiving applications from presidential hopefuls, the state news agency said, for polls next month expected to keep Bashar Al-Assad in power in the war-torn country. Two candidates filed applications with the high constitutional court, state news agency SANA said, a day after the speaker of parliament announced the poll will take place on May 26.

The first was a former lawmaker, while the other had applied for the last presidential elections in 2014, but did not meet the criteria. They will now have to garner support from at least 35 members of the 250-seat parliament, which is dominated by Assad's Baath party. Fifty-five-year-old Assad, who succeeded his father in 2000 and has managed to cling on to power through a decade of conflict, has not yet announced his own candidacy.

Presidential hopefuls have until April 28 to put forth their candidacy for the second such vote to be held during the war. They must have lived continuously in Syria for at least 10 years, meaning that opposition figures in exile are barred from running. The last presidential elections in 2014 were the first such multi-candidate polls in Syria, but only two other candidates were approved and Assad won with an official 88 percent of the vote.

The government has since won back large parts of the country from rebels and jihadists. But Syria is also battling a dire economic crisis compounded by Western sanctions and a financial crisis in neighboring Lebanon. The war has killed more than 388,000 people since it started in 2011 with the repression of anti-government protests, but endless rounds of talks have failed to find a political solution. —AFP

11 dead, 100 hurt in Egypt train accident

CAIRO: A train accident north of Cairo on Sunday left 11 people dead and 98 others injured, Egypt's health ministry said, in the latest rail calamity to hit the North African country. The ministry, in an updated toll, said that "11 people were killed and 98 others injured in a train accident in Toukh", a small farming town in the fertile Nile Delta about 40 kilometers (25 miles) outside the capital.

Egypt's cabinet said in a statement that four carriages of the train heading from Cairo to Mansoura, a Delta city, came off the tracks. Dozens of ambulances were dispatched to the site, the health ministry added, and investigators have been sent to determine the accident's cause. President Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi tasked the military's engineering authority on Sunday with investigating the latest incident, which came on the heels of a deadly train crash last month that left at least 20 people dead.