



Britain opens visa scheme for millions of Hong Kongers

Macron gambles by saying 'non' to a third lockdown

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MOSCOW: Police detain a man during a rally in support of jailed opposition leader Alexei Navalny in Moscow yesterday. —AFP

Massive clampdown on Navalny protesters

US condemns Russia's 'harsh' tactics against protesters

MOSCOW: Police detained hundreds of people across Russia and blocked off the center of Moscow yesterday in a massive clampdown on protests demanding the release of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny. From Vladivostok in the Far East to Saint Petersburg on the Baltic Sea, thousands of police in riot gear were deployed to prevent a second weekend of mass demonstrations over the arrest of President Vladimir Putin's most prominent opponent. Navalny was detained at a Moscow airport in mid-January after flying back to Russia from Germany where he was recovering from an August poisoning he blames on the Kremlin.

The 44-year-old anti-corruption campaigner is being held in a Moscow detention centre and facing years of potential jail time in several different criminal cases, despite calls from Western governments for his release. In moves not seen in years in Moscow, police locked down the center of the capital on Sunday, with hundreds lining the streets, central Metro stations closed and the movements of pedestrians restricted.

Protesters who had hoped to gather outside the headquarters of the FSB

security service were instead scattered to various parts of the city as organizers made last-minute changes in locations.

AFP journalists saw dozens of protesters detained and forced into police vans. It was unclear amid the chaos how many people were taking part.

'People are outraged'

Independent monitor OVD-Info said more than 1,500 people had so far been detained across the country, including more than 300 in Moscow. It reported more than 4,000 detentions during last weekend's protests. Hundreds were marching through the city centre chanting "Freedom!" and "Putin is a thief!" as they headed towards the Matrosskaya Tishina prison where Navalny was being held.

Police followed the protesters, breaking up the crowds and playing pre-recorded messages on loudspeakers warning that the gathering was illegal because of coronavirus restrictions.

"The people in power don't want to listen to anything or to anybody," 34-year-old vet Darya said at the Moscow rally. In the second city of Saint Petersburg police closed off the main thoroughfare Nevsky Prospekt, closed Metro stations and police cars were

parked all across the center, an AFP journalist reported.

"The whole center is cordoned off," said Natalya Grigoryeva, who came to the Saint Petersburg rally with her daughter. "And who is this all against, against their own people?" Earlier protesters had rallied in cities including the Pacific port of Vladivostok, where several dozen gathered in a central square despite police closing it off ahead of the rally.

Several thousand were also reported to have protested in the Siberian city of Novosibirsk despite temperatures dropping to -20 degrees Celsius (-4 degrees Fahrenheit).

This week several Navalny associates, including lawyer Lyubov Sobol and his brother Oleg, were placed under house arrest until late March pending charges for violating coronavirus restrictions by calling people to join protests. Navalny's spokeswoman Kira Yarmysh was detained late Saturday also over violating virus measures, the same day she was due to walk free after a nine-day jail term for violating protest laws.

In a continued effort to clamp down on online platforms used to coordinate the rallies, Russia's media watchdog yesterday ordered social

networks to block posts with "false" information about the protests, including those "over-estimating" numbers of participants.

US condemns clampdown

Meanwhile, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken yesterday condemned Russian authorities for their "harsh" response to protests across the country that called for the release of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny.

"The US condemns the persistent use of harsh tactics against peaceful protesters and journalists by Russian authorities for a second week straight," Blinken said on his official Twitter account. "We renew our call for Russia to release those detained for exercising their human rights," he added, after Russian police detained more than 1,000 people, including 142 in Moscow.

Authorities have ramped up pressure on the opposition with arrests and criminal probes, including several Navalny aides. A second weekend of protests began in several cities Sunday including Moscow, Saint Petersburg and Vladivostok in the Far East, where several dozen gathered in a central square despite police closing it off ahead of the rally. —AFP

Toilet brushes, blue pants: Symbol of Russia's protests

MOSCOW: Blue underwear and toilet brushes, snowball barrages and snow graffiti—Russia's protest movement in support of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny has seen demonstrators get creative. Here's a rundown of the unusual memes and symbols from recent anti-government rallies and what they mean.

Blue underwear

Since December Russian protesters have hung blue boxer shorts on street signs, posted pictures clad in just blue underwear and held them at protests to show how the country's best-known opposition figure claims he was poisoned. Navalny, who suffered an attack with the Novichok nerve agent in August, says agents from the Federal Security Service (FSB) placed the toxin in the lining of his blue underwear.

When President Vladimir Putin marked the Orthodox ritual celebrating the baptism of Jesus Christ this month by dunking himself in ice-cold water wearing blue swimming trunks, Navalny's allies joked that Putin was sporting his top opponent's undergarments.

Toilet brushes

After spending five months in Germany recovering from the poisoning, Navalny returned to Russia this month and was immediately detained. The 44-year-old anti-corruption campaigner called for mass rallies, spurring on the protests by releasing an investigation into a lavish property on Russia's Black Sea coast that he alleged is owned by Putin. The complex, which Navalny says cost more than \$1.35 billion, allegedly features everything from an underground ice rink to a casino. But what stuck out to the Russian opposition was the reported cost of a high-end toilet brush: 700 euros (\$619). Several protesters brought what appeared to be considerably cheaper versions to last weekend's rallies.

Snow tools

At the demonstrations in Moscow, protesters pelted riot police and even a car that reportedly belonged to the FSB with snowballs. They also wrote their demands, including "Free Navalny", on a snow-covered wall, which a police officer was filmed immediately wiping away. But the action at times grew violent, with protesters cracking a window of the reported FSB car and the TASS news agency reporting that snowball throwers damaged the driver's eyesight. —AFP

Palestinian killed in attempted West Bank knife attack

JERUSALEM: The Israeli army said it killed a Palestinian who carried out an attempted knife attack yesterday in the Gush Etzion area of the occupied West Bank. "A knife attack was reported at the Gush Etzion junction, south of Bethlehem," the army said in a statement. "The attacker was neutralized." The attacker "is dead", the army told AFP, confirming that the military had killed the assailant. The military later said the incident took place at a bus station, where soldiers were providing security to Israelis, with the suspect "running" at the forces while brandishing a stick with three knives fastened to it. —AFP

Israel says to send 5,000 vaccines to Palestinians

JERUSALEM: Israel's defense ministry said yesterday that it would send 5,000 coronavirus vaccine doses to the Palestinian Authority to inoculate medical personnel, following global calls for Israel to ensure Palestinians are vaccinated. "I confirm we are going to send 5,000 vaccines to medical teams in the Palestinian Authority," a spokesperson for Defense Minister Benny Gantz told AFP.

The Jewish state has launched an aggressive coronavirus vaccine campaign on Israeli territory, an effort widely regarded as the world's fastest per capita. More than three million of the country's nine million people have received the first of two required jabs of the Pfizer vaccine. —AFP



JERUSALEM: A Palestinian woman receives the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine at the Clalit Health Services in the Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem. —AFP

Iran's Zarif calls for 'all-inclusive' Afghan government

TEHRAN: Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif yesterday called for the formation of an "all-inclusive" Afghan government during a meeting with a Taliban delegation in Tehran, the ministry said. A delegation from the movement headed by its co-founder Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar arrived in Iran on Tuesday to exchange "views on the peace process in Afghanistan" at the invitation of the ministry. The visit comes as peace negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban resumed in early January in the Qatari capital Doha, meant to end a conflict spanning two decades.

"Political decisions cannot be made in a vacuum," Zarif told the delegation, according to a ministry state-

ment. "The formation of an all-inclusive government must take place in a participatory process and by taking into account the fundamental structures, institutions and laws, such as the constitution," he added. He also welcomed the idea of forming an "all-inclusive government with the participation of all ethnic and political groups". Zarif expressed hope the Taliban would "focus efforts on an immediate end to the pains of Afghan people, so that the establishment of peace in Afghanistan would strip the outsiders of a pretext for occupation". Iran has previously called for the forces of its arch rival the United States to withdraw from Afghanistan, its eastern neighbor.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani on Friday urged the new US President Joe Biden to put pressure on the Taliban and not rush to withdraw more troops from Afghanistan. His appeal came days after the Biden administration said it intends to reconsider a February 2020 agreement between former president Donald Trump and the Taliban. The agreement includes the complete withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan by May

2021 in exchange for the Taliban halting attacks on US forces, sharply decreasing the level of violence in the country and advancing peace talks with the government in Kabul. The Afghan government blames the Taliban for the lack of progress in negotiations that started in September last year and resumed this month.

"Since January 6, our delegation is in Doha ready to start the talks based on the agendas. But the other side is busy travelling abroad," government negotiator Muhammad Rasul Talib told reporters in Doha. "The negotiation is not in a stalemate yet, but there is a pause and the reason for that is the Taliban," he added. "The Afghan delegation is calling on them to come back, we believe the current opportunity to solve the problems should not be wasted." Kabul is pushing for a permanent ceasefire and to protect governance arrangements in place since the ouster of the Taliban by a US-led invasion following the September 11, 2001 terror attacks in New York. But violence has escalated across Afghanistan, with the Taliban refusing to make concessions. —AFP

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