

International

Britain opens visa scheme for millions of Hong Kongers

Website for visa applications goes online at 5pm in Hong Kong

HONG KONG: A new visa scheme offering millions of Hong Kongers a pathway to British citizenship went live yesterday as the city's former colonial master opens its doors to those wanting to escape China's crackdown on dissent. Anyone with a British National (Overseas) passport and their dependents can now apply online for a visa allowing them to live and work in the United Kingdom. After five years, they can apply for citizenship. The immigration scheme is a response to Beijing's decision last year to impose a sweeping national security law on Hong Kong to snuff out the huge and often violent democracy protests.

Britain has accused China of tearing up its promise ahead of Hong Kong's 1997 handover that the financial hub would maintain key liberties and autonomy for 50 years, and has argued it has a moral duty to protect its former subjects. "We have honored our profound ties of history and friendship with the people of Hong Kong, and we have stood up for freedom and autonomy," Prime Minister Boris Johnson said of the scheme this week.

The website for visa applications went online at 5pm in Hong Kong. China has reacted with fury to the visa offer, announcing that it would no longer recognize the passports as a legitimate travel or ID document. The move was largely symbolic as Hong Kongers tend to use their own passports or ID cards to leave the city. But Beijing said it was prepared to take "further measures", raising fears

authorities might try to stop Hong Kongers from leaving for Britain.

Yesterday, the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office of China's State Council said it strongly condemned the British for violating its promise not to give BN(O) passport holders right of residence. "This is a flagrant offense of China's sovereignty, and we firmly oppose it," it said. The office claimed the UK was beautifying its colonial history and called this "a shameless logic of bandits", seriously hurting the feelings of the Chinese". In a commentary on Sunday, China's state-run Xinhua news agency accused Britain of having a "colonial mentality".

Applications soar

It is not clear how many Hong Kongers will take up the offer—especially as the coronavirus restricts international flights and mires much of the world, including Britain, in a painful economic malaise. But the visa offer is available to a huge number of people—about 70 percent of Hong Kong's 7.5 million population. Applications for BN(O) passports have skyrocketed more than 300 percent since the national security law was imposed last July, with 733,000 registered holders as of mid-January.

Britain predicts up to 154,000 Hong Kongers could arrive over the next year and as many as 322,000 over five years, bringing an estimated "net benefit" of up to £2.9 billion (\$4 billion). The BN(O)



HONG KONG: This file photo shows people queuing to apply for British National (Overseas) passport, or "BNO", outside Hong Kong's Immigration Department building in the Wanchai district of Hong Kong. — AFP

passport is a legacy of Hong Kong's return to authoritarian China. Many Hong Kongers at the time wanted Britain to grant them full citizenship but China was opposed to the move.

The BN(O) was a compromise, allowing Hong Kongers born before 1997 the right to stay in

Britain for six months at a time, but with no working or settling rights. Now it has become one of the few ways out for Hong Kongers hoping to start a new life overseas as authorities conduct mass arrests of democracy supporters and move to purge the city of dissent. —AFP

Vietnam re-elects party leader Trong after congress

HANOI, Vietnam: Vietnam's ruling Communist Party chief Nguyen Phu Trong was re-elected yesterday—a victory that makes him the most powerful leader in decades—but his win was overshadowed by a serious coronavirus outbreak in the country. Trong, a 76-year-old pro-China conservative who is rumored to be in poor health, was given the nod after a week of closed-door talks at the twice-a-decade Communist Party congress. It will be his third term in office—a feat unprecedented in Vietnam's modern era.

"On yesterday morning, comrade Nguyen Phu Trong was elected the General Secretary of the 13th Communist Party Central Committee," the Vietnam News Agency reported. China's President Xi Jinping sent a message of congratulations to Trong, Chinese state media said yesterday. Another stint in the top job for Trong is seen as a boost for his high-profile anti-corruption campaign, officially dubbed a "blazing furnace", that has swept through the party, police and armed forces. "We can expect Trong to continue to push" his campaign, which

has claimed high-level party officials, including three Politburo members, said Carl Thayer, an emeritus professor at the University of New South Wales and an expert on Vietnam.

With graft widespread across all state sectors, Trong's anti-corruption drive has largely proved popular with the Vietnamese public and many party members. "We admired him for his determination and efforts to cleanse and purify the party," said Nguyen Tran Trung, a long-time Communist Party member. "Though not in good health, his presence in the leading position still scares bad cadres in the apparatus. He plays a major role in preserving the Communist Party," the 78-year-old state official told AFP.

But for opponents of the regime, the last five years have been marked by escalating repression, according to rights groups and analysts, who warned Trong is likely to push forward with the crackdown during his third stint in power. "We can expect a continuing crackdown on dissenting voices in the online social media," Thayer told AFP. Prisoners of conscience have



HANOI, Vietnam: This picture shows Vietnam's Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc (second right) congratulating the new Communist Party general secretary Nguyen Phu Trong (center) after his re-election during the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) 13th National Congress in Hanoi, as other nominated top party leaders Vuong Dinh Hue (right), Pham Minh Chinh (second left) and Vo Van Thuong (left) applaud. — AFP

doubled from 84 to 170 since the previous congress in 2016, according to Amnesty International, which says a large and growing proportion are jailed based on their expression online.

Trong, the first party general secretary to serve a third term since the "doi moi" era of economic reform began in 1986, has also served as president

since 2018. For the moment he remains so, but will step down later this year when the National Assembly appoints a replacement. This is expected to be Nguyen Xuan Phuc, currently prime minister, who has focused on the country's economic growth and integration, securing a number of international trade deals. —AFP

Pearl's family to challenge Pakistan murder acquittals

ISLAMABAD: The family of American journalist Daniel Pearl will challenge an order by Pakistan's top court to release a British-born militant acquitted of masterminding his kidnapping and brutal murder in 2002. The Supreme Court on Thursday upheld the acquittal of Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh and three other men last year, triggering outrage from the United States. Pearl was the South Asia bureau chief for The Wall Street Journal when he was abducted and beheaded by jihadists in Karachi in January 2002 while researching a story about Islamist militants.

"The Pearl family intends to file a review petition against the illegal and unjust majority decision," parents Ruth and Judea Pearl said in a statement that was tweeted by the murdered journalist's friend and former Wall Street Journal colleague Asra Nomani. They join both the federal government and Sindh provincial government—of which the city of

Karachi is the capital—in launching a plea for the latest verdict to be reviewed.

Lawyers for Pearl's family have argued that Sheikh played a crucial role in organizing the abduction and detention of the journalist before ordering his captors to kill him. Defense lawyers, however, say he was a scapegoat and sentenced on insufficient evidence. "It is beyond belief that Ahmad Omar Sheikh—who after 18 years of lies, had finally admitted in a handwritten letter to the court his role in the kidnapping for ransom of Daniel Pearl—has been given a clean slate and let loose once again upon the world to continue his international terrorist activities," Pearl's family said in the statement.

The four men—who have been detained under the emergency orders of Sindh government since their acquittal last year—still have multiple court challenges linked to their case. Sheikh, a British-born jihadist who once studied at the London School of Economics and had been involved in previous kidnappings of foreigners, was arrested days after Pearl's abduction. He was later sentenced to death.

US President Joe Biden's administration was "outraged by the Pakistani Supreme Court's decision", White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki told reporters last week. The new US Secretary of



KARACHI: Sheikh Aslam, brother of Sheikh Adil, one of the accused of murdering US journalist Daniel Pearl, gestures as he walks out from the central prison. —AFP

State, Antony J. Blinken, on Friday spoke with Pakistan's foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, pressing his "concern about the potential release of these prisoners", a spokesman for the US Department of State said. —AFP

New protests in France over security law

PARIS: Tens of thousands of protesters turned out in dozens of French cities Saturday against a security bill they say will restrict the filming and publicizing of images of police brutality, but also to protest the restrictions imposed against the coronavirus.

Those joining the demonstrations included activists from the "yellow vests" movement that gripped France for more than a year before the pandemic restricted large-scale protests. Others were there to stand up for the cultural sector, hit hard by the restrictions imposed to curb the spread of the coronavirus. Also among the protesters were young people calling for the right to hold rave parties such as the one in Brittany that attracted 2,400 at the start of the year.

"I have two reasons for coming today—the comprehensive security law and also to support cul-

ture," said Kim, a 24-year-old civil service intern. "Lots of stores are open, the metro is packed, yet cultural sites are closed, even though we can apply protective measures" against the coronavirus, she said.

The demonstrators are protesting draft legislation that would ban filming police activities, which the ruling LREM party of President Emmanuel Macron has said it would rewrite. But people are also protesting the use of surveillance tools such as drones and pedestrian cameras. Footage of white police beating up a black music producer in his Paris studio on November 21 has fuelled anger over the legislation, condemned by many as signaling a swing to the right by Macron.

Numbers down

According to interior ministry figures, 32,077 people turned out to protest across France, significantly down on the 133,000 they said attended the largest protest against the measures, back in November—although organizers put the true turnout then at more than half a million people. Organizers put the fall in numbers down to the coronavirus restrictions, poor weather and the fact that this was

just the latest in a long series of such protests.

France has recorded 75,000 deaths from coronavirus since the outbreak began and the country is bracing for another possible lockdown. In Paris, the large Place de la Republique was half full, AFP journalists reported, while around 3,000 people gathered in Montpellier, southern France. At around 5 pm, an hour before the start of the overnight 6-6 curfew now in place as a measure against the coronavirus, clashes broke out between a group of around 50 youths and police.

After being pelted with projectiles, the police used water cannon to clear the square. The Paris prosecutors office said 26 people had been detained. Hundreds turned out for similar rallies in other cities. The government argues that the proposed law is needed because police officers have become the targets of attacks and calls for violence against them on social media. But French media say a "new national plan of law enforcement" is being used to limit media coverage of demonstrations. The proposed security law, which has already been approved by the National Assembly, is to be examined by the Senate, France's upper parliamentary chamber, in March. —AFP

News in brief

S Africa orders Pfizer vaccines

JOHANNESBURG: South Africa has secured 20 million doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech coronavirus vaccine, the health minister told a Sunday newspaper. Africa's worst virus-hit country has yet to begin vaccinating its population against COVID-19, stirring criticism over slow procurement and lack of strategy. A first shipment of AstraZeneca/Oxford jabs produced in India is due to arrive today, with injections expected to start two weeks later. Health Minister Zweli Mkhize told The Sunday Times that 20 million additional vaccines had been ordered from US drugmaker Pfizer. —AFP

Protesters disrupt vaccination site

LOS ANGELES: Protesters briefly disrupted a coronavirus vaccination distribution center at Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles, US media reported Saturday. Several dozen people carrying signs demanding the end of lockdowns and promoting anti-vaccination conspiracy theories gathered at the entrance to the site, one of the largest in the US, social media posts showed. "There appears to be only about 30 protestors total. It's not clear why they've shut off the whole facility," tweeted social media user Mikel Jollet. —AFP

One dead, 5 missing in Fiji

SUVA, Fiji: At least one person was dead and five were missing yesterday as Fiji was battered by a tropical cyclone for the second time in a month. Cyclone Ana, a Category Two storm, slammed into the South Pacific island nation with winds up to 140 kilometers an hour (87 mph) and heavy rain, causing widespread flooding. The National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) said a 49-year-old man drowned while four fishermen and a three-year-old boy were missing. More than 7,600 people, many of them rescued from flooded villages, were taking shelter in evacuation centers. —AFP

Trump lawyers leave team

WASHINGTON: Several of former US president Donald Trump's impeachment lawyers have left his team a little over a week before his trial, US media reported Saturday. CNN cited unnamed sources as saying that five lawyers—including two who were thought to be leading the team—had parted ways with the Republican billionaire after disagreeing over his legal strategy. Trump had wanted the lawyers to continue his baseless claims of mass election fraud rather than focus on the legality of convicting a president after he has left office, CNN said, adding that he was "not receptive" to discussion. —AFP

Congo oppn to boycott elections

BRAZZAVILLE, Congo: The Republic of Congo's main opposition party will boycott the March 21 elections in which President Denis Sassou Nguesso, in power for decades, is running for re-election. The 77-year-old has held office for a total of 36 years, making him one of the longest-serving leaders in the world and head of a deeply poor nation. The holding of the presidential election "must not divide us as it has done in the past", said Pascal Tsaty Mabiala, first secretary of the opposition group Pan-African Union for Social Democracy (UPADS). —AFP