

International

China accuses EU of 'hypocrisy' after ambassadors summoned

US hits two Chinese officials with sanctions over Uighur abuses

BEIJING: Beijing accused the EU of "hypocrisy" yesterday after the two sides summoned each other's envoys in an escalating row over the treatment of China's Uighurs. France, Germany and other EU nations called in Chinese ambassadors to protest against sanctions imposed by Beijing targeting their citizens, including five members of the European Parliament as well as two EU bodies and two think-tanks.

Meanwhile, the US Treasury Department placed sanctions on two senior Chinese officials for what it called "serious human rights abuses" against Uighurs and other minorities in the country's Xinjiang region. "Chinese authorities will continue to face consequences as long as atrocities occur in Xinjiang," said Andrea Gacki, the Treasury official overseeing the sanctions program.

The sanctions targeted Wang Junzheng, the secretary of the Chinese Communist Party committee of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC), and Chen Mingguo, director of the Xinjiang Public Security Bureau. The Treasury action was part of a coordinated effort by the European Union, Britain, Canada and the United States to raise the pressure on Beijing for putting more than one million Xinjiang citizens, mostly Muslim Uighurs, in prison camps, and using many in forced labor programs.

The sanctions were a tit-for-tat response after the EU, Britain and Canada blacklisted four former and current officials in China's Xinjiang region. China called in the EU and British envoys in Beijing over the coordinated move. Rights groups say at least one million Uighurs and other mostly Muslim minorities have been incarcerated in camps in Xinjiang, where authorities are also accused of forcibly sterilizing women and imposing forced labor. China has strongly denied the allegations, saying training programs, work schemes and better education have helped stamp out extremism in the northwest region and raise income. "The EU only allows itself to arbitrarily smear and attack others, and even arbitrarily imposes sanctions based on false information and lies, but does



THE HAGUE: The entrance of the China embassy in the Netherlands in The Hague as the Dutch government summoned the Chinese ambassador after a lawmaker was among 10 Europeans sanctioned by Beijing in a row with the EU over the Uighur crackdown, the foreign ministry said. — AFP

not allow the Chinese to talk back or fight back," said foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying at a press briefing. "This in itself is double standards, a manifestation of bullying and hypocrisy." Washington, which had already imposed sanctions on two of the Chinese officials in July 2020, extended them to two others.

It is leading a drive to form a united front against China on issues from rights abuses in Xinjiang and Hong Kong to Beijing's claims over the South China Sea. China had until recently enjoyed relatively cordial relations with the EU, which has been muted over alleged rights abuses as it hunts a trade pact with the world's second largest economy. The European Union and China in December approved "in principle" a major investment pact after seven years of painstaking negotiations—but it is still expected to take months to be final-

ized and fully ratified as a legal text. Hua said China did "not accept the unreasonable practice of some European countries in summoning Chinese ambassadors." The tensions come as the EU seeks to formulate a strategy on China at a time when tensions between Beijing and Washington are emerging as the world's number one geopolitical issue. Beijing also released a report yesterday detailing what it said were human rights abuses committed in the US, citing gun crime, violence towards ethnic minorities and the way Washington has tackled the COVID-19 outbreak.

"The United States, which has always considered itself an exception and superior, saw its own epidemic situation go out of control, accompanied by political disorder, inter-ethnic conflicts, and social division," the report claimed. — AFP

'Dubious charge'

The accusations against Monjib relate to the management of a center he created to help promote investigative journalism. Six journalists and activists who were also on trial were sentenced to up to a year in prison. Three have left Morocco, and been granted political asylum in Europe.



RABAT: Moroccan historian and rights activist Maati Monjib (right), who was on hunger strike for 19 days, is embraced by a man upon his release from El Arjat prison near the capital Rabat on Tuesday. — AFP

Human Rights Watch said it was "relieved" at Monjib's release. His conviction "should be overturned because authorities did not notify him of the trial's last session, which took place in his absence," the New York-based watchdog said in a statement. It said that "the criminal investigation into the dubious charge of 'money laundering' against him is pending," and urged authorities to "respect his fair-trial rights by ending their refusal to grant him full access to his own case file". Monjib's support committee said he had requested transfer to hospital on Monday to "continue the hunger strike under medical supervision". He had become considerably weaker and had lost consciousness several times, his supporters said.—AFP



SAO PAULO: An aerial view of a burial at the Vila Formosa cemetery during the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, in Sao Paulo, on Tuesday. — AFP

Currently some 11.1 million Brazilians, or 5.2 percent of the population, have received at least one dose of vaccine and 3.5 million both doses, according to an AFP tally based on official figures.

Bolsonaro, who is up for re-election in 2022, has also gone from dismissing the pandemic to expressing solidarity "with all those who have lost a loved one." His presentation however was met with a cacophony of pot banging in the country's main cities such as Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Brasilia - a traditional sign of protest in Latin America.

Brazil's average daily COVID-19 death toll has more than tripled since the start of the year to 2,364, currently the highest worldwide. Experts say the explosion is fueled by a local variant of the virus that is believed to be more contagious. In a new warning sign, the prosecutor general's office said Tuesday the health ministry had told it that medical oxygen supplies were at "worrying" levels in six of Brazil's 27 states. One of Brazil's main oxygen suppliers, the White Martins company, said it was racing to keep up with an "exponential increase" in demand of up to 300 percent in some regions, prosecutors said in a statement.—AFP

Morocco dissident historian provisionally freed from prison

RABAT: Moroccan historian and rights activist Maati Monjib, who was on hunger strike for 19 days, was provisionally released from prison Tuesday after three months in custody. Friends and supporters welcomed the 60-year-old academic, who was visibly thin but happy as he walked out of El Arjat prison near Rabat, where he had been held since his arrest. "The accusations against me are fabricated... now that I enjoy provisional release, I will agitate for freedom of other detainees" held for their opinions, he said shortly after his release. Monjib's lawyer Mohamed Messaoudi told AFP earlier on Tuesday that "the investigating judge has decided to provisionally release him." Monjib, known for his open criticism of the authorities, was taken into custody on December 29 as part of a preliminary investigation into money laundering.

In parallel, a Moroccan court sentenced him in January to one year in prison for fraud and undermining state security, as part of a trial that opened in 2015.

His defense team said they were not told about the hearing and Monjib purportedly was not in attendance. He has repeatedly denounced his "wrongful arrest" and has denied the charges against him. Moroccan authorities have said Monjib received a fair trial. His supporters in Morocco and abroad have repeatedly demanded his release, calling him a "prisoner of conscience" and expressing worry about the health effects of his hunger strike.

In a statement on Facebook in November saying he had contracted the novel coronavirus, Monjib said he also suffered from heart problems and diabetes. His lawyer said Tuesday that he was "in good spirits".

Brazil's 24-hour COVID deaths surpass 3,000

BRASÍLIA, Brazil: Brazil's daily COVID-19 death toll soared past 3,000 for the first time Tuesday as the hard-hit country struggled to contain a surge of cases that has pushed many hospitals to breaking point. The health ministry registered a record 3,251 deaths in the past 24 hours, bringing Brazil's overall death toll to nearly 299,000 — second only to the United States.

The latest bleak milestone came on the same day President Jair Bolsonaro installed his fourth health minister of the pandemic, facing pressure to change tack after downplaying the virus and flouting expert advice on containing it. Cardiologist Marcelo Queiroga, 55, took over the post from Eduardo Pazuello, an army general with no medical experience whose handling of Covid-19 was widely criticized.

Pazuello is notably facing investigation for failing to ensure oxygen supplies to the northern city of Manaus, where there were horrific scenes in January of COVID-19 patients suffocating to death when hospitals ran out. Bolsonaro's first two health ministers, doctors Luiz Henrique Mandetta and Nelson Teich, both fell out with the president over his defiance of expert advice on containing the virus.

'Very soon a normal life?'

Speaking late Tuesday Bolsonaro said that Brazil would resume "very soon a normal life" thanks to the vaccination campaign that he had early criticized. "I want to reassure the Brazilian people and inform them that the vaccines are guaranteed. By the end of the year we will have more than 500 million doses of vaccine to vaccinate the whole population," Bolsonaro said.



PURI: Artist Manas Sahoo makes a sand art to observe 'World TB Day', in Puri, India, on Tuesday.—AFP

As COVID rages, world risks losing TB gains

PARIS: In the year since COVID-19 flipped the world on its head, diagnosis and treatment of another serious lung disease—tuberculosis—has plummeted, leaving experts fearful that progress in tackling that pandemic will be lost. Tuberculosis is treatable and easily diagnosed yet until COVID-19 emerged it was the world's biggest infectious killer, leading to 1.4 million deaths each year and infecting more than 10 million people. While TB has been with humans for millennia, the progress towards eradicating this preventable disease has been painstaking, with the overwhelming majority of cases occurring in developing nations.

In the run up to World Tuberculosis Day yesterday, the Stop TB Partnership warned that lockdowns and healthcare interventions prompted by COVID-19 had seen a 23 percent drop in TB treatment and diagnosis. That essentially sets the world 12 years back in its fight to eradicate the global killer. "Twelve years of impressive gains in the fight against TB, including in reducing the number of people who are missing from TB care, have been tragically reversed by another virulent respiratory infection," said Lucica Ditiu, executive director of the Stop TB Partnership. "In the process, we put the lives and livelihoods of millions of people in jeopardy."

Worse than feared

At the start of the pandemic, modelling by Johns Hopkins University showed that a three-month lockdown followed by 10 months of health service disruption would lead to an additional 6.3 million TB cases by 2025. In the same period, 1.4 million people would die from the disease, the model showed.

Experts now acknowledge the situation is far worse than the one envisaged in the Johns Hopkins' simulation. Statistics from the nine highest incidence countries—Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Philippines, South Africa, Tajikistan and Ukraine—showed TB diagnosis and treatment has already declined by a total of one million people.

And new studies from India and South Africa show that people suffering with TB are three times more likely to die if infected with COVID-19. "The effects of COVID-19 go far beyond the death and disease caused by the virus itself," the World Health Organization's Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said this week. "The disruption to essential services for people with TB is just one tragic example of the ways the pandemic is disproportionately affecting some of the world's poorest people, who were already at higher risk for TB." Jose Luis Castro, president and CEO of global health organization Vital Strategies, told AFP that the impact of COVID-19 on TB would be felt "for a long time to come". —AFP

News in brief

Rato faces string of new crimes

MADRID: Former IMF chief Rodrigo Rato, already serving time for misuse of funds, was on Tuesday charged with a string of new crimes including tax fraud and money laundering, with Spanish prosecutors seeking a 70-year jail term. The scandal-hit 72-year-old was charged with 11 new offences which took place while he was economy minister in the government of Jose Maria Aznar (1996-2004), prosecutors said in a statement. Rato, who also served as deputy prime minister before going on to head the IMF from 2004-2007, was sentenced to 4.5 years in 2018 but was recently moved to a semi-open prison regime. —AFP

Ernst given 10-mth suspended jail term

VIENNA: Prince Ernst August of Hanover, husband of Caroline of Monaco, received a ten-month suspended jail sentence in Austria on Tuesday for violence against a police officer and threatening employees, the Austrian press agency APA said. Prince Ernst, 67, was also required by the court to find another home in Austria and attend psychotherapy. The Wels Court, which handed down the verdict, was not immediately available to confirm the news. The prince had faced up to three years in prison in the trial that flowed from events in the summer of 2020, magistrate Gerlinde Hellebrand said earlier. — AFP

Belarus businessman held in DR Congo

LUBUMBASHI, DR Congo: A Belarus businessman with alleged ties to Belarus strongman Alexander Lukashenko has been arrested in the Democratic Republic of Congo with two others and transferred to the capital Kinshasa, a security source said Tuesday. Alexander Zingman, who is honorary consul for Zimbabwe, was arrested in DR Congo's second city Lubumbashi, the source said. The source did not give the reason for the arrest of the 54-year-old Zingman, who also holds US nationality. Zingman's company AF Trade DMCC confirmed he was detained with another Belarusian Oleg Vodchits and Italian businessman Paolo Persico on March 18.

22 charged over anti-Senegalese riot

BANJUL: Gambian police said Tuesday that over 20 people have been charged over an anti-Senegalese riot this month in the tiny West African country surrounded by Senegal. On March 15, the coastal fishing town of Sanyang erupted in violence after a Senegalese man allegedly murdered a Gambian named Gibril Ceesay. Crowds then torched a police station, looted a Chinese-owned fishmeal processing plant, destroyed fishing boats and attacked homes, the police said in a statement. Senegal's ambassador to The Gambia, Bassirou Sene, said Senegalese fishermen in the town had tried to shelter the suspected murderer and were attacked by locals. — AFP

NASA will attempt first off-world flight in early April

WASHINGTON: NASA is targeting early April for the Ingenuity Mars Helicopter to make the first attempt at powered, controlled flight on another planet, the space agency said Tuesday.

Right now, the ultra-light aircraft remains fixed to the belly of the Perseverance rover, which touched down on the Red Planet on February 18. On Sunday, Perseverance dropped the debris shield that had protected Ingenuity during landing, and is currently making its way to the "airfield" where Ingenuity will attempt its flights. Once there, it will have 30 Martian sols—equal to 31 Earth days—to carry out its mission.

"The best guess we have right now is April 8," for the first flight, said Bob Balaram, Mars Helicopter chief engineer at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, though he added it could be sooner or later by a few days. Balaram revealed for the first time that Ingenuity is carrying a small piece of cloth that covered one of the wings of the Wright brothers' first aircraft that achieved the first powered flight on Earth at Kitty Hawk in 1903, to pay tribute to the milestone.

Ingenuity will be attempting to fly in an atmosphere that is one percent the density of Earth's, which makes achieving lift harder—but will be assisted by a gravity that is one-third our planet's. The first flight will involve climbing at a rate of about three feet (one meter) per second to a height of 10 feet (three meters), hovering there for 30 seconds, then descending back to the surface. Ingenuity will be taking high resolution photography as it flies.

Before any of this happens, however, Ingenuity needs to be placed at its launching site, and set upright, a process that will take a few more days. Once Perseverance drops off the helicopter, it needs to drive away about five meters within 25 hours so it doesn't cast a shadow on Ingenuity. —AFP