

International

India virus infections top 20m, top cricket league suspended

Europe, US ease curbs after mass vaccinations

NEW DELHI: India's coronavirus caseload topped 20 million yesterday as the relentless surge finally forced the suspension of the nation's lucrative cricket competition involving some of the sport's biggest global stars. The South Asian nation's plight was in stark contrast to Europe and the United States, where mass vaccinations have allowed the easing of many coronavirus restrictions. More than 350,000 new cases were reported in India yesterday, a drop from the peak of 402,000 last week, giving some cause for optimism that the worst of the devastating wave may have passed.

"If daily cases and deaths are analyzed, there is a very early signal of movement in the positive direction," senior health ministry official Lav Aggarwal told reporters. "But these are very early signals. There is a need to further analyze it." At least 153,403,380 cases of coronavirus have been registered across the world so far. The vast majority have recovered, though some have continued to experience symptoms weeks or even months later. These figures are based on daily tolls provided by health authorities in each country and exclude later re-evaluations by statistical organizations, as has happened in Russia, Spain and Britain.

On Monday, 10,340 new deaths and 682,324 new cases were recorded worldwide. The countries with the most new deaths were India with 3,449, followed by Brazil with 983 and Argentina with 540. The United States is the worst-affected country with 577,500 deaths from 32,471,116 cases. After the US, the hardest-hit countries are Brazil with 408,622 deaths from 14,779,529 cases, India with 222,408 deaths from 20,282,833 cases, Mexico with 217,345 deaths from 2,349,900 cases, and the United Kingdom with 127,539 deaths from 4,421,850 cases. India's healthcare infrastructure has struggled to cope with the huge number of cases, with deep shortages of medicines, hospital beds and medical oxygen. But the glitzy Indian Premier League, the world's richest Twenty20 cricket tournament, had carried on in empty stadiums, sparking criticism that it was inappropriate under the circumstances.



MUMBAI: An elderly man gets inoculated with a dose of Covishield vaccine against the COVID-19 coronavirus at a drive-in vaccination facility in Mumbai yesterday. — AFP

Organizers said they did not want to compromise the safety of staff and players, including some of the world's biggest cricket stars from India, Australia, England and New Zealand. "These are difficult times, especially in India and while we have tried to bring in some positivity and cheer... it is imperative that the tournament is now suspended," they said in a statement. The wave in the South Asian nation-spurred by huge gatherings including the Hindu festival Kumbh Mela—has highlighted the danger of COVID-19, which has already claimed more than 3.2 million lives worldwide.

EU eyes travel resumption

Leaders in Europe, meanwhile, were looking to take further steps towards recovery with a proposal to revive international travel and tourism as early as next month. The European Commission proposed Monday that travellers who are fully vaccinated with EU-approved shots

or those coming from countries where Covid-19 is under control should be allowed to enter the bloc.

The EU has so far approved the Pfizer/BioNTech, Moderna, Johnson & Johnson and AstraZeneca vaccines. But in a sign that the pandemic is not yet over in Europe, Germany cancelled its world-famous Oktoberfest beer festival for a second year running.

Americans are among those eyeing possible European vacations this summer, with more than 100 million people in the United States now fully vaccinated.

US media reported Monday that authorities were expected to authorize the Pfizer shot for children aged 12 and up. The successful drive has allowed authorities in many parts of the world's biggest economy to start relaxing curbs, including New York and Florida. And in China, where the virus first emerged in 2019, millions of tourists have flocked to domestic tourist attractions with the country's outbreak largely under control.—AFP

India's young fight the pandemic with apps and oxygen

MUMBAI: Her exam revision done, schoolgirl Swadha Prasad gets on with her real work: finding life-saving oxygen, drugs and hospital beds for Covid-19 patients as India reels from a brutal second wave of infections. As their government struggles to tackle the pandemic, young Indians have stepped into the breach, setting up apps to crowdsource aid, delivering key supplies and using social media to direct resources to people in need.

Prasad works with dozens of volunteers—all aged between 14 and 19 — as part of the youth-led organization UNCUT, building online databases packed with information about medical resources available across the country. It is a 24/7 operation, with the teenagers constantly on their phones as they verify the availability of supplies, update information in real-time and field calls from frantic relatives.

"Some of us do midnight to morning shifts, because the calls don't stop at 3 am," said Prasad, 17, who works a 14-hour stretch from before midnight until one in the morning. It is a long and often tiring affair, the Mumbai-based student said, but added: "If I can help save a life, there is no part of me that is going to say no." And lives have been saved, she said, pointing to a case where the team was able to source oxygen for a young Covid-19 patient in the middle of the night after an agonizing two-hour wait.

"It's not only about providing resources... sometimes people just need to know they are not alone", she said.—AFP

N Korea founder's memoir triggers debate in South

GOYANG, South Korea: A South Korean publisher's defiant move to release the memoirs of the North's founder Kim Il Sung has triggered a heated debate over Seoul's decades-old ban on Pyongyang's propaganda under national security laws.

Critics of the measure say Southerners are politically mature enough to judge such material for themselves and argue it amounts to unnecessary censorship in a vibrant democracy that is one of the most wired and educated countries in the world. But the South remains officially at war with its nuclear-armed and impoverished neighbor, with legislation to match.

The national security law dates from 1948, before the outbreak of the Korean War, and still blocks ordinary citizens from accessing most North Korean-produced content, including its official Rodong Sinmun newspaper. Reproducing or possessing banned pro-Pyongyang materials is punishable by up to seven years in prison.

Even so publisher Kim Seung-kyun in April released the North Korean founder's eight-volume memoirs, titled "With the Century", telling AFP he did so to promote inter-Korean reconciliation. An anti-North civic group filed a criminal complaint, police launched an investigation and within days the country's major bookstores—who had received it via a publishers' association—pulled it from their shelves.

It briefly remained available online for 280,000 won (\$250) for the full set, but by last week it was no longer available from popular web portal Naver, while searches on local bookselling platforms Kyobo and Yes24 showed no results. The moves triggered a debate over censorship and whether people really needed to be protected from reading the words of Kim Il Sung.

"South Koreans already have a high level of judg-

News in brief

Chinese Navy to help Indonesia

JAKARTA: Chinese navy ships have arrived off Bali to help haul up a submarine that sank last month killing 53 crew, the Indonesian Navy said yesterday as it geared up for a deep-sea salvage operation. The help arrived after other foreign ships from Australia, Singapore and Malaysia left the archipelago, having assisted Indonesian authorities in finding the stricken vessel. The KRI Nanggala 402 — one of five submarines in Indonesia's fleet—disappeared last month while it was scheduled to take part in live torpedo training exercises. An underwater rescue vehicle supplied by neighboring Singapore gave visual confirmation that the German-built sub was lying on the sea floor more than 800 meters (2,600 feet) deep, broken in three parts, confirming there was no hope of finding survivors. — AFP

Virus-hit PNG starts vaccine roll-out

PORT MORESBY: Papua New Guinea's prime minister launched a nationwide coronavirus vaccine roll-yesterday, hoping to quell a runaway outbreak and counter widespread public hesitancy about jabs. James Marape said a batch of 100,000 vaccines had arrived in Papua New Guinea and would be distributed countrywide, as he urged skeptical health workers and the general public to get vaccinated. "We want to reduce and prevent deaths of our people," he said, launching the "Sleeves Up" campaign. After weathering the initial stages of the pandemic, the country has recorded most of its 11,262 COVID-19 cases and 115 known deaths since February 2021. — AFP

Mexico to extradite drug fugitive

MEXICO CITY: A Mexican judge has approved the extradition to the United States of a fugitive drug trafficker who is accused of killing a US federal agent, judicial sources said Monday. The ruling, which came from a Mexico City criminal court Friday, rejected an appeal from lawyers for Rafael Caro Quintero, who is on the FBI's 10 most wanted list with a \$20 million bounty on his head over the murder of a Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agent. His lawyers argued that the crime had already been adjudicated in a Mexican court so he could not be tried for the same act in the United States.

Person shot trying to enter CIA HQ

WASHINGTON: An armed person was shot by FBI agents Monday after a standoff of several hours at the entry gate to the CIA headquarters, the federal investigation agency said. The unidentified person was prevented from driving past the initial gate into the CIA's sprawling wooded compound just outside Washington early Monday afternoon. Security personnel reportedly tried to negotiate with the person to surrender for several hours. The FBI said in a statement that the individual "emerged from his vehicle with a weapon and was engaged by law enforcement officers." "The subject was wounded and has been transported to a hospital for medical attention." —AFP



BHOPAL: Mohammad Javed Khan, an auto rickshaw driver speaks on his mobile phone while sitting in his auto rickshaw that he converted into an ambulance by fitting an oxygen cylinder with accessories to serve COVID-19 coronavirus patients for free in Bhopal yesterday.—AFP

Rickshaw 'ambulance' offers free oxygen, transport for patients

BHOPAL: When Indian auto-rickshaw driver Mohammad Javed Khan saw people carrying their coronavirus-stricken parents to hospitals on their backs as they were too poor to afford an ambulance, he knew he had to help. Khan, a 34-year-old driver in the central Indian city of Bhopal, sold his wife's jewelry and converted his three-wheeled vehicle into a small ambulance, fitting it out with an oxygen cylinder, an oximeter to measure oxygen levels in the blood, and other medical supplies. As India grapples with a harrowing COVID-19 crisis that has seen infections skyrocket and the healthcare system stretched to breaking point, individuals like Khan have stepped forward to try and help their local communities.

"A critically ill patient cannot be brought to the hospital without oxygen support. So, I thought, why not turn my three-wheeler into an ambulance. It's not as spacious as an ambulance, but it can surely save lives," Khan told AFP.

"I see young people struggling without oxygen. Even when they call ambulances, the ambulances are charging 5,000-10,000 rupees (\$70-140). How will a poor person be able to afford it? Especially during this pandemic when most people don't have an income?"

Myanmar charges Japanese journalist over 'fake news'

YANGON: The Myanmar junta has charged a Japanese journalist under a "fake news" law, a report said yesterday, in the latest blow to press freedom since the military seized power. Freelance reporter Yuki Kitazumi was arrested last month and charged on Monday-World Press Freedom Day—with spreading fake news, according to a report by Kyodo news agency. He is one of 50 journalists currently held in Myanmar as part of the junta's crackdown on widespread protests against its February 1 coup. The country has been in turmoil since civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi's government was ousted, with more than 750 people killed as security forces struggle to quash near-daily demonstrations against their rule.

Kyodo cited an unnamed Japanese embassy official saying Kitazumi had no health problems, despite spending several weeks in Yangon's Insein prison, which has a long and unsavory reputation for holding political prisoners. Kitazumi has been in custody since April 18 — the second time he had been arrested since

the coup. In February, he was beaten up and briefly held during a crackdown on protesters but was later released. Japan, for years a top aid donor to Myanmar, has been pressing for his release.

"Naturally, we will continue to do our utmost for the early release of the Japanese national being held," Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi told Japanese journalists during a trip to Britain, according to national broadcaster NHK. A total of 766 civilians have been killed in the military crackdown on protests, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), a local monitoring group.

Kitazumi is the first foreign journalist to be charged since the coup. A Polish photographer arrested while covering a protest in March was freed and deported after nearly two weeks in custody.

As well as arresting journalists, the generals have sought to clamp down on news of the crisis by shuttering independent media outlets and throttling internet speeds. The AAPP says there are 50 journalists in custody at the moment, 25 of whom have been prosecuted, while arrest warrants are out for another 29. Despite the dangers, protesters continue to take to the streets, with early-morning demonstrations yesterday yesterday in the second-biggest city Mandalay, as well as northern Kachin state. The military has defended its seizure of power, pointing to fraud allegations in the November election, and condemned protesters as rioters and terrorists. — AFP



This picture taken on April 30, 2021 shows South Korean publisher Kim Seung-kyun holding a copy of the eight-volume memoirs of North Korea's founder Kim Il Sung, titled "With the Century", during an interview at his home in Goyang. — AFP

ment," said Ha Tae-keung, a lawmaker from the conservative People Power Party—who was jailed under the national security law as a student activist.

"No one is going to be deceived by a fantasy-like memoir of Kim Il Sung anymore," he told AFP. "We now need to actively guarantee freedom of expression."

Kim Il Sung, the grandfather of the North's current leader Kim Jong Un, ruled the world's most reclusive country for nearly five decades until his death in 1994, with a mixture of his own brand of Stalinism and an unabashed personality cult. The memoir, first published by Pyongyang in 1992 and available in around 20 languages around the world, portrays him as a heroic Korean guerilla leader against Japanese colonial forces, often denying and downplaying his Chinese and Soviet connections.—AFP