

International

Georgia ex-leader 'abused in prison, fears for his life'

Saakashvili on hunger strike in protest

News in brief

26 die in Niger school fire

NIAMEY: At least 26 children aged between five and six burnt to death on Monday when their straw and wood classrooms caught fire in southern Niger, seven months after a similar tragedy in the capital Niamey. "Right now, we have 26 dead and 13 injured, four of them seriously," said Chaibou Aboubacar, mayor of Maradi city. Niger, one of the poorest countries in the world, has tried to fix shortages of school buildings by constructing thousands of straw and wood sheds to serve as classrooms, with children sometimes sitting on the ground. Fires in the highly flammable classrooms are common but rarely result in casualties. Three days of mourning have been declared in the Maradi region from yesterday. Twenty children were burnt to death in a school fire in a working-class district of Niamey in April. —AFP

Knife-wielding attacker

OSLO: Norwegian police said they shot and killed a knife-wielding man who threatened several people yesterday in central Oslo before attacking a patrol car that arrived on the scene. A policeman was injured as the officers tried to arrest the attacker in the capital's Bislett neighborhood, police told a press conference. No details about the identity of the attacker or his motive were disclosed. "We're not excluding any motives, but there is nothing at this stage that indicates this is a terror attack," police inspector Egil Jorgen Brekke told reporters. According to tabloid VG, the man was Russian and in his 30s, and had been sentenced to psychiatric care in December 2020 after stabbing a man in Oslo in 2019. Footage posted by witnesses on social media and broadcast by Norwegian media show the barebreasted suspect wielding a large knife on the pavement outside a shop. —AFP

Mass funeral for blast victims

FREETOWN: Sierra Leone on Monday held a mass burial for dozens of victims of the fuel-tanker explosion that ripped through the capital Freetown and killed at least 115 people, according to the latest toll. Thousands of mourners lined the road as 85 bodies were taken to a cemetery on the outskirts of the city that had been used in the past to bury victims of Ebola outbreaks, an AFP correspondent at the scene said. The explosion was sparked after a lorry crashed into a fuel tanker on Friday. Witnesses say most of the victims were street sellers and motorcyclists who were engulfed in flames as they tried to retrieve fuel leaking from the tanker before it ignited. "We are here today to give a dignified burial to our compatriots," President Julius Maada Bio said at the funeral, promising a thorough investigation to ensure such an event would not happen again. —AFP

Tunisian demonstrator dies

AGUEREB: A Tunisian demonstrator died overnight after inhaling tear gas as police dispersed protests over the reopening of a landfill site, a medic and a relative said yesterday. The 35-year-old died in the town of Aguerieb in the central region of Sfax, which has seen weeks of angry demonstrations over a growing waste crisis. "Abderrazek Lacheheb was transferred to Aguerieb hospital suffering from asphyxia," a hospital official said. The man's cousin Houcine Lacheheb said the man had been alive when he arrived at the hospital but had died after security forces fired tear gas outside. "It was the police who killed him," he said. An AFP journalist in Aguerieb saw security forces using tear gas to disperse stone-throwing demonstrators. Tunisian human rights group FTDES said Aguerieb had seen "a violent intervention by security forces on Monday night to force the reopening of the Qena rubbish dump". —AFP

German infection rate soars

BERLIN: Germany's incoming coalition parties have unveiled fresh proposals to fight the country's COVID resurgence, as the weekly rate of new coronavirus infections hit an all-time high. Germany registered an incidence rate of 201.1 new cases per 100,000 people over the past seven days, the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) said, surpassing the previous record of 197.6 reached on December 22, 2020. The surge in cases, blamed on the nation's relatively low vaccination rate, has prompted widespread alarm in recent weeks as hospital beds fill up rapidly. Underlining the urgency, the three parties striving to form Germany's next coalition government following September's general election presented a raft of pandemic-fighting proposals - despite not officially being in power yet. —AFP

TBILISI: Georgia's jailed ex-president and opposition leader Mikheil Saakashvili, who has been on hunger strike for weeks, said on Monday he feared for his life after prison guards assaulted him. Saakashvili, who served as president between 2004 and 2013, was arrested on October 1 on his return from exile in Ukraine. He has refused food for 39 days to protest against his imprisonment, which he says is politically motivated.

His jailing has exacerbated a political crisis that erupted last year after the opposition denounced fraud in parliamentary elections won narrowly by



Political crisis exacerbated

the ruling Georgian Dream party. The guards "abused me verbally, punched me on the neck, dragged me on the ground by my hair", Saakashvili said in a letter released through his lawyer, adding that his controversial transfer to a prison hospital was "aimed at killing" him. He was moved on Monday to a prison hospital that rights officials say fails to ensure his proper treatment.

The flamboyant pro-Western reformer's arrest provoked the largest anti-government demonstrations in a decade. Chanting Saakashvili's name, about 40,000 demonstrators flooded on Monday

'In a corner': German unvaccinated defiant as rules tighten

RADEBERG: The eastern German state of Saxony may have ordered tough curbs on the unvaccinated to push them to get the COVID-19 jab, but shop assistant Sabine Lonnatzsch, 59, is unmoved. The new rules are "discriminatory" because they are "pushing the unvaccinated further into a corner," she tells AFP. She won't change her mind about getting inoculated—she just won't go to restaurants or events anymore. "I've had corona cases in my family and in my eyes it is nothing more than a bad flu," she says. With COVID-19 infections rocketing in Germany, Saxony this week became the first to largely exclude unvaccinated people from indoor dining, cinemas and bars.

The new rules, likely to be emulated by other states in the coming weeks, are designed not only to reduce the spread of COVID-19 but also to encourage more people to get inoculated. But Lonnatzsch is not the only one resisting the jab in the town

of Radeberg in Bautzen district, which has one of the lowest vaccination rates in the country at just 45.7 percent. The clothing store No 1 Mode where she works has a sign in the window that lets customers know that all are welcome—regardless of vaccination status.

'Bad for business'

Across the town square, the co-owner of Cafe Roethig also has no plans to get the vaccine. Like many people in the region, Carola Roethig, 58, is "not convinced" by the jab because "it was developed in such a short space of time". The district of Bautzen has one of the highest incidence rates in the country at 645.3 cases per 100,000 people, but Roethig is not worried about catching the virus.

The new rules are "definitely bad for business," she says at the cafe's bakery counter, which is lined with untouched fresh cakes, tarts and iced donuts.

Ex-minister's lucrative second job deepens Britain's sleaze row

LONDON: British Prime Minister Boris Johnson yesterday faced fresh accusations of sleaze among his ruling Conservatives, following a report that a party lawmaker earned more than £1 million in the last year from a second job. Geoffrey Cox, a lawyer and former attorney general, netted the lucrative sums for legal work while collecting his Tory MP annual salary of around £82,000 (\$111,000, 96,000 euros), the Daily Mail said.

The additional pay, detailed in parliament's register of interests, came in part from advising the government of the British Virgin Islands, a UK overseas territory and tax haven accused of corruption, it

Separated relatives finally find 'human connection' at JFK

NEW YORK: As soon as she spots her son Liam at New York's JFK airport, Alison Henry runs towards him and gives him a long hug, tears welling up in her eyes. "I just can't believe it, two and half years!" she says after stepping off a British Airways flight from London, as the United States reopened to vaccinated visitors Monday. "It's just so emotional, overwhelming," Henry, 63, tells AFP.

She and 31-year-old Liam have spoken every week since the United States drastically limited travel from several countries, including the UK, at the start of the pandemic in March 2020. "(But) this human connection, when it's real and in front of you, is what I missed the most," says Liam, who has lived in Brooklyn for several years, his eyes glistening above his face mask. He has lots of places to show his parents and grandmother Patricia - who didn't hesitate to make the trip despite being almost 88 years old - but mostly they just plan to spend time together.

"Every day we have been watching the news, waiting and waiting for America to open up," said mum



TBILISI: Georgians rally to demand the release of the jailed ex-president and opposition leader Mikheil Saakashvili in Tbilisi. — AFP

evening into the central Freedom Square in the Georgian capital Tbilisi, AFP reporters saw. "A mass, permanent protest movement begins in Georgia and will not stop until Mikheil Saakashvili is set free and snap elections are called," Nika Melia, the chairman of Saakashvili's United National Movement party, told the crowd.

"We will not disperse, our protest will be relentless and peaceful, we will not let the regime provoke us to a civil confrontation." Protesters then marched through downtown Tbilisi towards the prime minister's office, vowing to blockade the building. Prime Minister Irakli "Garibashvili will not be able to leave

or enter his office", Melia said. One of the demonstrators, businessman Niko Mgeladze, 46, said: "Saakashvili is a victim of political vendetta, we will not stop until he is liberated."

The pro-opposition Mtavari TV station aired footage of hundreds of riot police being deployed outside government buildings. On Monday morning, doctors who examined Saakashvili said he was "at high risk of multi-systemic complications and needs to be urgently treated in a high-tech clinic". Georgia's rights ombudswoman Nino Lomjaria said the prison hospital failed to meet the doctors' criteria. — AFP



RADEBERG: People queue in front of a vaccination centre in Radeberg, eastern Germany, to get a COVID vaccination without an appointment. — AFP

"Many of our customers are not vaccinated, so we are losing income, because fewer people are coming in," she says. The rules are also bad for her personal life. "I'm not allowed to go to a restaurant in the evening and have a nice dinner with my husband. I don't

think it is right." Outside the cafe, 40-year-old Susan feels the same. "Nothing would convince me" to get the jab, she says, without giving her last name. "I see no sense in it because (vaccinated people) can still get the disease and infect others." — AFP

added. Cox also utilized changes to parliamentary attendance rules brought in during the coronavirus pandemic to vote remotely in the House of Commons from the Caribbean while working there, the paper found. His office did not respond to a request for comment.

The revelations intensify the pressure on Johnson, following days of criticism over sleaze and cronyism claims against his government which began with the botched handling of another Conservative lawmaker's case. The UK leader prompted outrage last week when he tried to overhaul parliament's internal disciplinary process, which would have prevented the 30-day suspension of Owen Paterson. Paterson was found to have committed an "egregious" rules breach, after repeatedly lobbying ministers and officials for two companies paying him more than £100,000 a year.

Although Johnson swiftly abandoned the unprecedented overhaul attempts - prompting Paterson to

resign from parliament - it threw the spotlight on a raft of allegations around MPs' behavior. Johnson also drew renewed fire for skipping an emergency debate Monday on the standards system regulating lawmakers, instead making a visit to a hospital in northeast England. Attention is now increasingly turning to the issue of MPs' second jobs, with reports yesterday detailing at least 10 other Conservatives with outside work earning them more than £50,000 a year.

In a series of interviews, deputy prime minister Dominic Raab said there were already "strict rules about declarations and accountability" over second jobs. Raab told Times Radio that Cox's work in the British Virgin Islands "is a legitimate thing to do as long as it's properly declared". "In terms of accountability, it will be up to voters to decide whether their MP representing them is (has) got the right priorities and that's the same for all of us," he added to LBC radio. "That's the ultimate accountability we have in our democracy." — AFP



NEW YORK: A couple embrace as they stand before airline staff after arriving on a flight from the UK, following the easing of pandemic travel restrictions at JFK international airport in New York. — AFP

Alison. They booked their tickets as soon as the announcement was made official last month. At terminal seven inside JFK, the first passengers off BA's first flight since the borders reopened are greeted with clapping and cheering and company-colored red, white and blue balloons. They also receive cookies in the shape of a yellow taxi, a big apple and the Statue of Liberty, three symbols of the metropolis that is desperate to welcome back tourists to boost its ravaged economy.

Businessmen are among the first to disembark. "It's great to be back. It's fantastic," several of them say to waiting TV crews. Next come the passengers eager to reunite with loved ones. They include a grandmother who has never seen her grandson before, a man who waits with a bouquet of red roses for a close friend he has not seen for 11 years, and an aunt who finds her two nieces and plans a big family reunion dinner tonight. After 730 days of separation, Jill Chambers is finally able to hug her sister and nephews. "I'm so happy," she repeats over and over, her eyes red.

Before finding Chambers, her sister Louise Erebara had warned: "I'm going to cry like a hysteric." "It's been terrible not knowing when we were going to see them again due to Covid, not knowing if the borders were ever going to open," Erebara said. For Max, a young man in a hurry to reunite with friends and family, the separation was also "very, very hard." "We communicated on Zoom, but it's not the same as in real life," he told AFP before rushing towards the exit. To mark the occasion, British Airways gave the flight the prestigious number "BA1," which belonged to the Concorde when it was still flying between London and New York. The trip was "fantastic," says BA CEO Sean Doyle, making his first visit to New York since the beginning of last year. BA never completely stopped its services throughout the pandemic, but the first flight of the reopening is "a very important milestone," he tells AFP. — AFP