

## International

# Chinese city offers cash for clues in COVID 'people's war'

## City traces the source of its latest outbreak

BEIJING: A COVID-hit Chinese city is offering thousands of dollars for anyone giving clues in tracing the source of its latest outbreak, as part of a "people's war" to stamp out one of the country's largest resurgences in months. China reported 43 local cases yesterday in a Delta-driven surge that has fanned out to 20 provinces and regions, keeping new case numbers in the double-digits over the past three weeks. As more countries lift COVID measures, Beijing officials have stuck stubbornly to a zero-COVID strategy that has maintained low infection numbers due to strict border closures, targeted lockdowns and long quarantines.



### Current outbreak hits over 40 cities

But the current outbreak has hit more than 40 cities, and officials in Heihe - a northern city on the border with Russia - said they would offer 100,000 yuan (\$15,500) as a reward for information. "In order to uncover the source of this virus outbreak as soon as possible and find out the chain of transmission, it is necessary to wage a people's war of epidemic prevention and control," the city government said in a notice.

Officials said cases of smuggling, illegal hunting and cross-border fishing should be reported immediately, adding that those who have bought imported goods online ought to "immediately sterilize" them and send



BEIJING: Commuters ride the subway during evening rush hour in Beijing yesterday. — AFP

them for tests. The latest wave has seen millions put under lockdown and domestic travel rules tightened, with many planes and trains cancelled. A cluster in central Henan province has been linked to schools, as health authorities urged more rapid vaccination of children. Over 3.5 million vaccine doses have been given to children aged between three and 11, according to official data.

Beijing's rigorous anti-virus stance - which has been used as political capital to extol the virtues of China's leadership - has started to draw more public debate in recent weeks. In an interview with Phoenix Television being shared on Chinese social media, virologist and University of Hong Kong professor Guan Yi

appeared to call for better data to evaluate China's vaccine efficacy. "We should not be carrying out mass nucleic acid tests at every turn" to detect COVID-19 cases, or blindly taking booster jabs, he said.

He instead urged antibody tests and timely updates by vaccine makers on the effectiveness of their jabs against variants. The country has five conditionally approved vaccines, but their published efficacy rates - varying between around 50 and 82 percent - lag behind rival jabs from Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna. The official Xinhua news agency has lashed out against critics of China's approach, saying "strict containment measures are still the best way to save lives" and calling Beijing's efforts "unquestionable". — AFP

## Will tensions spike in Iraq after drone 'message' to PM?

BAGHDAD: An assassination attempt targeting Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhemi marks the latest escalation in tensions following last month's legislative polls, amid allegations of fraud from pro-Iran groups. The attack came after pro-Iran factions and their supporters had denounced the election results, which saw the Fatah (Conquest) Alliance - political arm of the predominantly Shiite paramilitary Hashed Al-Shaabi - shed a large number of seats in parliament.

The attempt early Sunday also followed days of violence as hundreds of Hashed supporters protested outside - then attempted to storm - the heavily fortified Green Zone that houses the premier's residence, the government and diplomatic missions. The prime minister escaped unharmed after an explosive-laden drone hit his residence, although two bodyguards were reportedly wounded.

### What is context?

Analysts interviewed by AFP were unanimous that the attack was closely linked to the elections and the negotiations to follow on forging parliamentary alliances ahead of selecting a new government. Renad Mansour, a senior research fellow at the UK-based Chatham House, said pro-Iran groups, such as the Hashed, use "coercive power" to "maintain their standing, notwithstanding whether they won or lost the election".

These groups refuse to be excluded from any back-stage negotiations on the formation of the next government, he said. On the eve of the attack on Kadhem's house, firebrand Shiite cleric Moqtada Al-Sadr, whose movement gained the largest number of seats in the polls, met several Sunni and Shiite officials - notably excluding any Fatah Alliance members.

According to Lahib Higel, a senior Iraq analyst at the Belgium-based International Crisis Group, the pro-Iran factions have "sought different tactics to put pressure on government formation negotiations". These have included "claiming the election results are fraud, using street pressure and as we saw two days ago the attempted breach of the Green Zone", she said. Hundreds of supporters of the Fatah Alliance set



BAGHDAD: Cars are parked outside one of the Green Zone entrances in the Iraqi capital, hours after a drone attack on the residence of Iraq's prime minister inside the zone. — AFP

up camp on Saturday outside the Green Zone, hours before the assassination bid, which has gone unclaimed.

### Violence as political weapon?

On Friday evening, following clashes during the pro-Iran demonstrations, Qais Al-Khazali, head of the Asaib Ahl Al-Haq force - a key component of the Hashed - "threatened" Kadhem, according to Hamdi Malik, an associate fellow at the Washington Institute. He has tweeted a video of Khazali seen addressing Kadhem and vowing the premier would be put on trial for the "blood of the martyrs" - referring to two protesters reportedly killed in the clashes. Khazali was among those who condemned the attack. Malik said that although Kadhem's home had been targeted by drones in the past as a "message", the latest attempt in which the residence was struck went a step further. According to Mansour of Chatham House, drone attacks in Iraq have become a "common strategy of warning".

Such attacks have often targeted US interests in Baghdad and the Kurdish capital Arbil in northern Iraq. They remain largely unclaimed but have been blamed on groups loyal to Iran and seeking the expulsion of US forces from Iraq. In recent years, anger has mounted towards the Hashed, particularly among youth who accuse it of being more loyal to Iranian interests than those of Iraqis. Pro-Iran factions have also been blamed for the targeting and killing of demonstrators in near-nationwide protests that began in October 2019. — AFP



SAN JOSE: Nicaraguan citizens exiled in Costa Rica protest against the results of the Nicaraguan election, outside the Nicaraguan Embassy in San Jose. — AFP

did face dismissed by critics as regime loyalists. The British government said the ballot was "an election in name only," while US President Joe Biden said its outcome was "rigged" long before the "pantomime election." On Monday, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken threatened further sanctions and visa restrictions "for those complicit in supporting the Ortega-Murillo government's undemocratic acts."

Faced with international criticism, Ortega lashed out at Spain and the European Union, saying they were led by "fascists" and "Nazi parliamentarians." Overnight in the streets of the capital Managua, supporters waving red and black flags of Ortega's party celebrated in the Plaza de las Victorias. "Whether the Yankees like it or not, we rule!" said one woman.

## ISS astronauts return to Earth after 6-month

WASHINGTON: Four astronauts returned to Earth Monday in a SpaceX craft after spending six months on the International Space Station, a NASA live broadcast showed, marking the end of a busy mission. The international crew conducted thousands of experiments in orbit and helped upgrade the solar panels on the ISS during their "Crew-2" mission. Its descent slowed by four huge parachutes, their Dragon spacecraft - dubbed "Endeavour" - splashed down in the Gulf of Mexico at 10:33 pm before it was lifted onto a recovery ship. NASA astronauts Megan McArthur and Shane Kimbrough, Akihiko Hoshide of Japan and Frenchman Thomas Pesquet from the European Space Agency were then taken out of the capsule and placed on stretchers as a precautionary measure - human bodies need to re-adjust to gravity after extended periods in space.

"It's great to be back to Planet Earth," Kimbrough was heard saying on the NASA live broadcast after Dragon splashed down. The ISS activities of the Crew-2 astronauts included documenting the surface of the Earth to record human-caused changes and natural events, growing Hatch Chile peppers, and studying worms to better understand human health changes in space. "Proud to have represented France once again in space! Next stop, the Moon?" Pesquet had tweeted ahead of the trip home. Their journey back to Earth began when Endeavour undocked from the ISS at 2:05 pm, NASA announced. It then looped around the ISS for around an hour-and-a-half to take photographs, the first such mission since a Russian Soyuz performed a similar maneuver in 2018. The Dragon, which flew mostly autonomously, has a small circular window at the top of its forward hatch through which the astronauts can point their cameras.

The departure was delayed a day by high winds. Bad weather and what NASA called a "minor medical issue" have also pushed back the departure of the next set of astronauts, on the Crew-3 mission, which is now set to launch Wednesday. Until then, the ISS will be crewed by only three astronauts - two Russians and one American. SpaceX began providing astronauts a taxi service to the ISS in 2020, ending nine years of US reliance on Russian rockets for the journey following the end of the Space Shuttle program. — AFP

### News in brief

#### Hamas sentences 3 to death

GAZA: The Islamist movement Hamas which rules the Gaza Strip said yesterday it had sentenced three people to death, two of them for collaborating with its enemy. The Hamas military court said recent rulings "included three death sentences, two of them against collaborators with the occupation, and the third against a drug dealer". The court also ruled on 11 other cases involving the same charges. All were handed jail terms ranging from four years to life, except for one suspect whose drug trafficking charge was dropped. Hamas took over the Gaza Strip in 2007 and has ruled it since, while Zionist entity has imposed a blockade on the territory. Since then, Hamas and Zionist entity have fought four wars, in 2008, 2012, 2014 and this year. Previously, Hamas announced in late October it had sentenced six Palestinian "informants" to death for collaborating with Zionists. — AFP

#### 11,000 cross into Uganda

GENEVA: At least 11,000 people have crossed into Uganda to escape clashes in eastern DR Congo that flared at the weekend, the UN Refugee Agency said yesterday. The number is the largest refugee influx into Uganda for more than a year, said UNHCR spokeswoman Shabia Mantoo, adding that the vast majority were women and children. "An upsurge of fighting in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo has forced at least 11,000 people to flee across the border into Uganda since Sunday night," Mantoo told a briefing in Geneva. "The fighting between militia groups and Congo's armed forces is taking place in North Kivu's Rutshuru Territory." Some 8,000 asylum-seekers crossed at Bunagana town and another 3,000 at the Kibaya border point, both of which are around 500 kilometers southwest of Uganda's capital Kampala. — AFP

#### Soldier, 15 jihadists killed

OUAGADOUGOU: One Burkina Faso soldier and around 15 jihadists died in fighting over the weekend, the army of the west African nation said. The soldier died on Saturday in eastern Komadjar province in a battle that saw about 15 "terrorists neutralized", it said. "One soldier from the detachment unfortunately fell during the fighting," the statement said, adding that three others were wounded. The army's response "enabled the neutralization of around 15 terrorists and the recovery of their weapons. A large quantity of ammunition and motorbikes were also seized," it said. Burkina Faso has been facing regular and deadly jihadist attacks since 2015, particularly in the northern and eastern regions, close to Mali and Niger. — AFP

#### Nurse gets life sentence

TOKYO: A former nurse who murdered three patients by contaminating their intravenous drips with disinfectant was sentenced to life in prison yesterday by a Japanese court, according to local media. During her trial, 34-year-old Ayumi Kuboki admitted to killing the patients in their 70s and 80s five years ago in a case that shocked Japan. She had previously told police she may have killed 20 people over just two months, but later told prosecutors she could not comment on that during the trial. The presiding judge at the Yokohama district court said he had considered handing Kuboki the death sentence, public broadcaster NHK reported. "She said she regrets (her actions) and wants to pay for her crime. There's a chance she will be reformed, and I couldn't help but to hesitate over choosing a death sentence," the judge said. — AFP

#### Ethiopia's year-long war

ADDIS ABABA: Foreign envoys scrambled yesterday to end Ethiopia's year-long war, hoping an African Union-led push can bring about a cessation of hostilities before a feared rebel march on the capital. Jeffrey Feltman, US special envoy for the Horn of Africa, returned to Ethiopia for a late-night meeting with his AU counterpart, former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, the State Department said. "We believe there is a small window of opening to work with (Obasanjo)," spokesman Ned Price told reporters Monday. Last week Feltman met top Ethiopian officials before travelling to Kenya to see President Uhuru Kenyatta, who has been closely involved in regional mediation efforts. "We have engaged with the TPLF as well," Price said, referring to the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) rebel group. — AFP

## Ortega under fire for Nicaragua vote 'farce'

MANAGUA: Nicaragua's longtime leader Daniel Ortega faced a torrent of international criticism Monday after he won a fourth straight presidential term in what critics described as a "farce" election with his political opponents jailed or exiled. With Ortega's victory in Sunday's poll a foregone conclusion, the United States and Europe led fierce condemnation of the 75-year-old former guerrilla whom they accused of dictatorial tactics and of crushing dissent. A partial official count from the Supreme Electoral Council showed Ortega and wife Rosario Murillo, his vice president, securing 75 percent of votes.

Nicaragua is now fully "an autocratic regime" after the deeply deficient elections handed Ortega his fifth overall presidential term, the European Union said. The polls "lack legitimacy" after Ortega "eliminated all credible electoral competition," EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said in a withering statement on behalf of the 27-nation bloc, adding further sanctions were being considered. The election took place without independent international observers and with most foreign media denied access to the country.

Spain branded the vote "a farce against democracy," with seven would-be presidential challengers detained in Nicaragua since June and the five contenders Ortega

Nicaragua's neighbor Costa Rica, however, said there was no way to determine whether the vote was "credible, independent, free, fair and inclusive." Uruguay and Colombia were among other Latin American states to not recognize the outcome.

Former guerrilla hero Ortega launched a new attack on his opponents Sunday, saying: "This day we are standing up to those who promote terrorism, finance war, to those who sow terror, death." He was referring to Nicaraguans who took part in massive protests against his government in 2018, which were met with a violent crackdown that claimed more than 300 lives in Central America's poorest country. Some 150 people have been jailed since then, including 39 opposition figures rounded up since June. — AFP