

International

Fatigue and frustration as China presses strict zero-COVID strategy

Many businesses on the brink of collapse

News in brief

Cambodia frees 27 prisoners

PHNOM PENH: Cambodia has released 27 activists jailed over charges of incitement against strongman Hun Sen's government as the country prepares to host international talks. Among those released in the past 12 days were members of environment group Mother Nature Cambodia as well as outspoken union leader Rong Chhun, said Am Sam Ath, deputy director of rights group Licadho yesterday. He said courts reduced their sentences or granted them bail, but the charges against the individuals had not been completely dropped. Cambodia is due to host an online summit of Asian and European leaders next week. It also faces growing calls to improve its human rights record as it prepares to take the helm of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in 2022. Am Sam Ath attributed the prisoners' release to government sensitivities to overseas criticism. —AFP

Bodies found 11 years after

WELLINGTON: Eleven years after a New Zealand mine disaster claimed 29 lives, investigators yesterday said they had found the remains of at least two of the victims but were unlikely to launch a recovery operation. The 2010 Pike River Mine disaster was one of New Zealand's worst industrial accidents, shocking the nation and prompting multiple recovery attempts and a charged criminal investigation. The disaster is believed to have been caused by a blast triggered by a methane build-up. Only two of the 31 miners on the afternoon shift were able to make their way out. Tunnel collapses have all but ended efforts to recover the bodies or gain more evidence about the disaster. But by digging a borehole, experts have now been able to gather images from the furthest reaches of the mine. Police said they had spotted two sets of human remains and a possible third. —AFP

Ethiopia journalist wins award

LONDON: Ethiopian journalist Solan Kolli on Tuesday won the Rory Peck prize for his coverage of the devastating conflict in the Tigray region of his home country. Freelancer Kolli, 32, won in the news category for a report commissioned by Agence France-Presse on massacres of civilians. "This was a truly underreported conflict," said the judges granting the award. Kolli's work "gave context and addressed the political realities on the ground," they added. AFP was one of the first independent news media in Tigray after the conflict started in November 2020, when the Ethiopian government sent troops to topple the TPLF, the regional ruling party. "His work was bold and brave with understated interviews, which put this very-hard-to-reach conflict in the spotlight," said the judges. —AFP

Ireland's COVID cases rise

LONDON: Ireland said it was asking people to work from home again while expanding its COVID-19 vaccination booster program and certification scheme, as case rates and hospitalizations rise nationwide. In a televised broadcast, the Prime Minister Micheal Martin said it was increasingly clear the country was experiencing "another surge of COVID infection" and that he needed "to act now". "Our advice is now that everyone should work from home unless it is absolutely necessary that they attend in person," he added. Martin noted Ireland's COVID passes scheme, based on vaccination or recovery from the virus, would now legally include cinemas and theatres, while bars and pubs would now be required to close by midnight. He also said vaccine boosters would be extended to everyone with an underlying condition and everyone over the age of 50. —AFP

Three killed in Kazakhstan

NUR-SULTAN: A gas cylinder exploded in a residential building in northern Kazakhstan, killing three people and leaving 10 more needing hospital treatment, emergency services in the Central Asian country said yesterday. A statement by emergency services said "three bodies were discovered" at the site of the explosion - a three-flat building in the village of Shortandi near the capital Nur-Sultan. Emergency services said that they were able to put out the fire just over two hours after the accident was called in late on Tuesday. Gas explosions and house fires are common in Kazakhstan, with critics accusing the government in the oil-rich ex-Soviet country of failing to deliver quality infrastructure, especially in the provinces. —AFP

BEIJING: Nearly two years into a pandemic that has seen China pursue some of the world's most stringent coronavirus measures, some grumbling has started to emerge over the strategy, particularly as other nations learn to live with the virus. The zero-COVID approach is unrelenting - with border closures, targeted lockdowns and mass testing triggered sometimes by just one case.

The cost and pain of the strategy have been felt especially acutely by the 210,000 residents of Ruili, a Chinese city on the border with Myanmar that has endured three major lockdowns and frequent mass testing - leaving many businesses on the brink of collapse. A merchant surnamed Lin said his jewelry



Beijing facing growing domestic pressures

business was hanging by a thread, with tourists and customers staying away because of COVID restrictions. "We continue operating... but we're scraping by," Lin told AFP, refusing to give his full name for fear of reprisals.

In a widely shared television interview this month, University of Hong Kong professor Guan Yi questioned China's strategy, arguing it should not conduct mass testing "at every turn" or give out booster vaccine doses without enough data on their efficacy. While China largely succeeded in



RUILI, Yunnan: Photo shows police tape blocking access to a building as part of COVID-19 coronavirus measures in the city of Ruili which borders Myanmar, in China's southwestern Yunnan province. — AFP

stamping out infections during the first year of the pandemic, the Delta variant has proven more difficult to contain.

Cases have been detected in more than 40 cities in recent weeks, putting millions under lockdown and disrupting the lives of millions more - even though the numbers pale in comparison with many other countries. Weddings were cancelled and mourners told to keep funerals short, as schools were closed and flights grounded - sometimes stranding thousands of tourists. And there was outrage online over health workers killing a pet dog with a crowbar while its owners were in quarantine, with furious social media users complaining about how harshly COVID

measures have been implemented.

Those deemed to have failed in controlling COVID are often sacked, driving local officials to increasingly drastic containment measures. One region offered thousands of dollars for information about an outbreak. Beijing is "facing growing domestic pressures to pivot to a more flexible approach", Yanzhong Huang of the Council on Foreign Relations told AFP. The desperate saga of one man highlighted the trouble some have faced because of tech malfunctions or bureaucratic lags. After an overnight work trip, the man could not get the "green code" on a health app that people require to travel and was left stranded. —AFP

Justice delayed as Taliban build their legal system

KANDAHAR: A small carpeted room serves as a makeshift jail for 12 "criminals" who are awaiting Taliban justice, caught in the legal system which the Islamists are building at the heart of their new Afghan regime. None of the prisoners being held on the ground floor of the Taliban headquarters in Panjwai district in southern Afghanistan have yet seen the local judge, who is busy in another area.

Until he arrives, the Taliban fighters of the unit in Kandahar province-left to their own whims and understanding of the group's interpretation of Islamic law-represent the entirety of the justice system. "They will keep me here until I can pay back the person I owe money to," said Haj Baran, a 41-year-old businessman arrested three days earlier for an outstanding debt.

"We have a good system of judgment with the Islamic law of the Taliban," he told AFP, as a guard watched closely. After a nearly 20-year insurgency, the Taliban took power in Afghanistan in August by force. But they long ago placed their version of justice at the centre of their ideology,

and have "made the courts a means of conquering power", says Adam Bazco, a researcher who conducted a field investigation on the Taliban judicial system from 2010 to 2016.

From 2004 on, in areas the Taliban controlled, "people were turning to them because of growing discontent with the interference of Western groups in their land disputes and a judicial system that appeared increasingly corrupt and nepotistic", Bazco says. In the context of war, he explains, the severity of the Taliban punishments was welcomed by some. They were known for their harshness-but also their impartiality, speed and predictability. Three months after the Taliban seized power, however, they are still struggling to implement that system across the country.

'I did nothing wrong'

At the nearby central prison in the city of Kandahar, the deputy director Mansour Maulavi brandishes a length of electric cable as a whip as he shows off the fetid barracks. One wing houses 1,000 drug addicts



PANJWAI: A prisoner sits in a bed at the Panjwai district jail in Kandahar province. — AFP

going through forced withdrawal, he says. Now 200 "criminals" are also being held there. "It is better for Islamic law to decide" who is a criminal, says Maulavi, who used to run the region's clandestine Taliban prison. Under the previous ineffective and often corrupt system, "they didn't know," Mohammad Naem, sitting cross-legged in the prison yard, is among those awaiting judgment.

He was arrested two months ago while at home with his wife and a 14-

year-old girl he said he wanted to marry. "The girl agreed but the parents didn't," the 35-year-old says, explaining that the parents called the Taliban to complain of sexual assault. "But I didn't touch the girl, they can do tests and check," Naem says. If he is found guilty of having sexual relations outside marriage he risks being condemned to death by stoning. "I just want to be judged according to Islamic law, because I did nothing wrong," he says. —AFP

Taliban appeal to US Congress to release Afghanistan assets

WASHINGTON: The Taliban called yesterday on US Congress members to release Afghan assets frozen after their takeover of the country, warning economic turmoil at home could lead to trouble abroad. In an open letter, Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi said the biggest challenge facing Afghanistan was financial insecurity, "and the roots of this concern lead back to the freezing of assets of our people by the American government".

Washington has seized nearly \$9.5 billion in assets belonging to the Afghan central bank, and the aid-dependent economy has effectively collapsed-with civil servants unpaid for months and the treasury unable to pay for imports. Concerned nations have pledged hundreds of millions of dollars in aid,



KABUL: Residents gather next to a damaged minibus after a bomb blast where two people were killed and five wounded in Kabul yesterday. — AFP

but are reluctant to commit funds unless the Taliban agree to a more inclusive government and to guarantee the rights of women and minorities.

"I present to you our compliments and would like to share a few thoughts on our bilateral relations,"

several major newspapers such as the New York Times, Washington Post and Wall Street Journal as tensions soared between the two countries. But in the wake of a virtual summit between US President Joe Biden and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping, officials from both countries said they had agreed to allow new journalist visas to be issued.

A State Department spokesman said Tuesday that discussions in recent months had led to "some initial progress" in "a few areas" of the media environment. The official said China had "committed to issue visas for a group of US reporters, provided they are eligible under all applicable laws and regulations." Beijing also promised to "permit US journalists already in the PRC (People's Republic of China) to freely depart and return, which they had previously been unable to do," the US official said.

Chinese state media said both sides had reached

Muttaqi wrote, noting that 2021 was the centenary of Washington recognizing Afghanistan's sovereignty. In measured understatement, he added: "Akin to other world countries, our bilateral relations have also experienced ups and downs."

Muttaqi said Afghanistan was enjoying stable government for the first time in over 40 years-a period that started with an invasion by the Soviet Union in 1979 and ended with the withdrawal of the last US troops on August 31. From 1996 to 2001, the Taliban ruled Afghanistan with an iron fist, brutally violating human rights in the name of Islamic law, sparking fears of a return of their abuses.

The Taliban have since returning to power gone to great lengths to convince the international community that they intend to do things differently this time-though no female ministers have been named, and girls are still barred from returning to secondary school. "Practical steps have been taken towards good governance, security and transparency," Muttaqi wrote. "No threat is posed to the region or world from Afghanistan and a pathway has been paved for positive cooperation." —AFP

an agreement, including to "reciprocally approve" the visas of new journalists. Both sides agreed to extend the validity of journalist visas to one year, after both countries had largely capped permits to three months. Asked about the agreement yesterday, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian told reporters that "this hard-won achievement is in line with the interests of media on both sides, and is worth treasuring."

He added that Beijing hopes "both sides will put in place the relevant policies and measures as soon as possible." The US official added that Washington would continue to push for "expanding access and improving conditions for US and other foreign media," and for broader freedom of the press in general. The State Department believes these measures will allow US media correspondents to return to China "to continue their important work." —AFP

US and China agree to ease restrictions on journalist visas

WASHINGTON: The United States and China have agreed to ease restrictions on journalist visas shortly after a long-awaited virtual summit between its two leaders, with Beijing yesterday calling the move a "hard-won" achievement. Washington regularly denounces the deterioration in China's treatment of US media members, and has taken measures against Chinese media on US soil that have been accused of being Beijing's propaganda organs.

In 2020, Beijing expelled Americans working for