



A tale of two Chiles:
Polar opposite candidates
vie for presidency

Philippines' Duterte condemns South China Sea latest flare-up

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BERLIN: A sign requesting visitors to wear protective face masks is seen near booths of a Christmas market at Alexanderplatz in Berlin yesterday. — AFP

Europe battles COVID-19 surge

'Jabbed, cured or dead', Germany warns

BERLIN: Germans faced the stark warning yesterday that they would be either "vaccinated, cured or dead" from COVID by the end of winter, as Austria took the dramatic step of returning to a partial lockdown. Belgium and the Netherlands meanwhile condemned the clashes that rocked weekend protests against new anti-COVID measures, meant to contain a surge in infections sweeping parts of the continent.

Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte slammed three nights of unrest as "pure violence" by "idiots", while his Belgian counterpart Alexander de Croo called the violence at a 35,000-strong protest in Brussels "absolutely unacceptable". The anger comes amid growing alarm over about Europe's fourth wave of the pandemic, blamed on a sluggish vaccine uptake in some nations, the contagious Delta variant and the colder weather moving people indoors again. "Probably by the end of this winter, as is sometimes cynically said, pretty much everyone in Germany will be vaccinated, cured or dead," German Health Minister Jens Spahn said, as he urged more citizens to get the jab.

Outgoing Chancellor Angela Merkel warned that Germany's current COVID curbs - including barring the unvaccinated from certain public spaces - "are not enough". "We have a highly dramatic situation" as new infections "double every 12 days", Merkel told a meeting of leaders of her conservative CDU party, according to participants. Germany's worst-

hit regions have ordered new shutdowns, including the closure of Christmas markets.

'Very confusing'

The restrictions mirror those in neighboring Austria, which re-entered a partial lockdown, shuttering shops, restaurants and festive markets - the most drastic restrictions seen in Western Europe for months. Its 8.9 million people are not allowed to leave home with few exceptions such as going to work, shopping for essentials and exercising as virus cases are surging. The Alpine nation also plans a vaccine mandate from February 1, one of few places in the world to so far to announce such a move.

Austria's schools and kindergartens remain open, though parents have been asked to keep children at home when possible despite there being no distance learning offered during the three-week lockdown. One parent, Kathrin Pauser, said she was still dropping off her daughters aged nine and 11, both of whom were recently vaccinated, at school. "It's a very confusing situation," she told AFP. Across the border in Slovakia, unvaccinated people

were also facing curbs blocking them from entering non-essential stores.

'Dictatorship'

Tens of thousands of demonstrators took to the streets in European cities at the weekend to protest stricter COVID rules, with anger boiling over in some places. At least 130 people were arrested in the Netherlands over protests that began in Rotterdam on Friday, sparked by a COVID curfew, and spread to cities across the country. Several police officers were injured.

In Brussels on Sunday, officers fired water cannon and tear gas at a protest police said was attended by 35,000, demonstrating against a ban on the unvaccinated from venues such as restaurants and bars. And in Denmark this weekend, around 1,000 demonstrators protested government plans to reinstate a COVID pass for civil servants. "People want to live," said one of the organizers of the Dutch protests, Joost Eras. "That's why we're here."

A crowd of 40,000 marched through Vienna on

Saturday decrying "dictatorship", while some 6,000 people protested in the city of Linz on Sunday. French troops headed to Guadeloupe on Sunday after a week of unrest over COVID measures, while Prime Minister Jean Castex was set to convene a meeting in Paris with officials from the French Caribbean island. Roads were blocked Sunday after protesters defying a curfew looted and torched shops and pharmacies overnight, when police made 38 arrests and two members of the security forces were injured.

Low vaccination rate

Austria's decision to reimpose a partial lockdown flies in the face of earlier promises that tough virus restrictions would be a thing of the past. Over the summer, then chancellor Sebastian Kurz had declared the pandemic "over". But plateauing inoculation rates, record case numbers and a rising death toll have forced the government to walk back such bold claims. After taking office in October, Chancellor Alexander Schallenberg criticised the "shamefully low" vaccine rate - 66 percent compared to France's 75 percent - and banned the un-jabbed from public spaces. When that proved ineffective at squelching new infections, he announced a nationwide lockdown, with an evaluation after 10 days. In Germany, the EU's most populous nation, just 68 percent of the population is fully jabbed. — AFP



Austria returns to a partial lockdown

hit regions have ordered new shutdowns, including the closure of Christmas markets.

'Explosive' COVID riots paralyze Guadeloupe

POINTE-A-PITRE: School cancelled, barricades on the street and pharmacies trashed: days of rioting against measures to curb the spread of COVID-19 have brought normal routines on France's Caribbean island of Guadeloupe to a standstill. Paris authorities sent elite police and counter-terrorism officers to Guadeloupe over the weekend in a bid to quell the violence, the latest COVID-related headache in France's overseas territories for the government of President Emmanuel Macron.

Vaccination rates in France's overseas territories, in the Caribbean, Indian Ocean and the Pacific, have generally been far lower than those on the mainland and there has been repeated unrest over anti-virus measures. Protests in Guadeloupe, a territory of roughly 400,000 people, broke out after an announcement that coronavirus jabs would be mandatory for all healthcare workers, with the demonstrations marred by clashes and looting.

Overnight Sunday, police arrested 38 people after curfew violators looted and torched shops and pharmacies, and two security forces were injured. Macron acknowledged the gravity of the situation and urged local politicians not to mix the pressing issue of COVID with colonial-era grievances and also longstanding complaints the territory is economically neglected by Paris.

"We will not give in to lies, distorting of information and the exploitation by some people of this situation," he told reporters on a visit to the northern French city of Amiens, calling the situation "very explosive". "We do not play with health and we will not let the health of the French be played with for the sake of political infighting," he added.

The French reinforcements began dismantling protesters' road barricades shortly after their arrival, according to Colonel Jean Pierre from the gendarmerie in Pointe-a-Pitre, the island's main city. Prime

Minister Jean Castex, Overseas Territories Minister Sebastien Lecornu and Health Minister Olivier Veran will later Monday hold an emergency meeting with Guadeloupe lawmakers to discuss the situation on the island.

'Uncertain situation'

The barricades had impeded traffic, forcing the closure of schools on Guadeloupe's main island on Monday, the education ministry said. The Guadeloupe prefecture said protesters fired on security forces and firefighters, adding that "organized gangs" were now also involved in the unrest. Even though some barricades had been dismantled, "the situation remains uncertain concerning road traffic and the possibility of staff and students moving smoothly and safely seems compromised at this stage", the local authorities said in a statement.

Thirty people will appear in court on Monday in Pointe-a-Pitre for allegedly participating in the unrest, according to local prosecutor Patrick Desjardins. Government spokesman Gabriel Attal called the situation "intolerable and unacceptable" and vowed a tough response against a "small minority" who were intimidating health workers, preventing pharmacies from opening and even using barricades to block ambulances.

A dusk-to-dawn curfew from 6:00 pm to 5:00 am is currently set to last until today. Over the weekend, Guadeloupe's main trade union the UGTG called for continued protests. While the demonstrations were sparked by the vaccine mandate, they also express "the depth of suffering, inequality, poverty and exclusion felt by the people, notably youths and the elderly," said UGTG secretary general Maite Hubert M'Toumo.

Since summer, Guadeloupe's vaccination drive has picked up, with 90 percent of healthcare workers vaccinated, as well as nearly half the general population. In mainland France, the vaccine rate is close to 75 percent of the population. In the neighboring French overseas territory of Martinique meanwhile, a general strike has been called for today, calling for an end to obligatory vaccination for health workers but also for wage rises and other social grievances. — AFP

Russia sends Lebanon satellite images from day of Beirut port blast

MOSCOW: Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said yesterday that Moscow sent the Lebanese government satellite images from the day of last year's deadly Beirut port blast in an effort to help with the investigation. In a meeting with his Lebanese counterpart Abdallah Bou Habib in Moscow, Lavrov said Moscow had transferred pictures prepared by the country's space agency Roscosmos. Images that capture the port before and after the blast should help determine the cause of the explosion, Lavrov said during a press conference after their meeting.

"We hope that Lebanese specialists will answer this question that is really becoming a very powerful political irritant for Lebanon," Lavrov said. Lavrov also said they discussed the "possible participation" of Russian companies in the reconstruction of Beirut infrastructure that was

damaged in the blast. In August 2020, hundreds of tons of ammonium nitrate stored in the Port of Beirut detonated, sending a powerful explosion across the Lebanese capital that killed more than 215 people.

The Lebanese judge leading investigations into the blast was forced to stop his probe three times following lawsuits from ex-ministers suspected of negligence. The judge had requested the cooperation of several countries, including France and the United States, to obtain satellite images from day of the blast. In addition to the explosion, the Russian and Lebanese ministers discussed the issue of refugees that have fled Syria since 2011 to neighboring countries, including Lebanon. Lavrov spoke of the possibility of organizing an international conference on the issue in Lebanon, host to over 1.5 million Syrians. — AFP