

International

Moscow court begins hearings on closing top rights center

Prosecutors accuse centre of violating Russia's law on 'foreign agents'

MOSCOW: A court in Moscow yesterday began hearings into a request by prosecutors to shut down a key center of Russia's leading rights group Memorial. Dozens of supporters of Memorial gathered in frigid weather outside the Moscow City Court for the first of two court hearings this week on efforts to shutter the group, created in 1989 to catalogue Soviet-era crimes.

Founded by Soviet dissidents including Nobel Peace Prize laureate Andrei Sakharov, Memorial was a symbol of Russia's democratization efforts in the 1990s and is one of the biggest pillars of civil society. The pressure on the group comes in a year that has seen an unprecedented crackdown on Russia's opposition and independent media, with authorities imprisoning top Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny in February and banning his organizations.

Yesterday's preliminary hearing was in connection with a request by prosecutors to close Memorial's Moscow-based Human Rights Center, which campaigns for the rights of political prisoners, migrants and other disadvantaged groups.

Prosecutors accuse the center of violating Russia's law on "foreign agents" and of justifying "terrorism and extremism" by releasing lists of political prisoners that include banned figures like Navalny and members of outlawed groups such as the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Memorial said its lawyers put forward several

motions during the closed-door hearing, including that it be opened to the public and press, while prosecutors submitted their written case. Another preliminary hearing was scheduled for November 29, when Memorial said it would present its written position.

'Cannot destroy history'

Supporters outside the courthouse urged authorities not to go through with the ban. "You cannot destroy history because then the country will not have a future," said Alla Frolova, a coordinator with OVD-Info, a protest monitoring group that works with Memorial.

Memorial is due back before judges yesterday in another case at Russia's Supreme Court. Prosecutors have asked the Supreme Court to approve their request for the shuttering of Memorial International,

which focuses on efforts to remember victims of Soviet-era persecution.

Memorial International is also accused of violating the "foreign agents" law, which forces individuals or organizations to disclose sources of funding and label all their publications with a tag or face fines. The term is laden with Soviet-era connotations of treachery and espionage.

Memorial's Human Rights Center was put on the government's register of "foreign agents" in 2014, while Memorial International was added in 2016. Together the two entities form the core of

You cannot destroy history because then the country will not have a future



MOSCOW: People gather outside the Moscow City Court where a preliminary hearing into prosecutor's request to dissolve Russia's rights group Memorial's Human Rights Center. —AFP

Memorial's operations.

Ilya Novikov, one of Memorial's lawyers, said the closure of the group would once have been unimaginable. "If we fell from the moon and arrived from 2000, we could probably say that this is a farce," he said. But, he added, "this is the reality of 2021."

President Vladimir Putin's spokesman said the Kremlin would not comment at this stage. "This topic does not figure prominently on the agenda for the Kremlin and the president," Dmitry Peskov told reporters. "At this point, there is the position of the prosecution, and there's still no court decision." —AFP

HK independence activist jailed for secession

HONG KONG: A young Hong Kong democracy activist was sentenced to three and a half years behind bars yesterday after pleading guilty to secession under the city's sweeping national security law. Tony Chung, 20, is the youngest person to be convicted under the new law, which has crushed dissent in Hong Kong and transformed the once outspoken international business hub.

Earlier this month he pleaded guilty to one count of secession and one count of money laundering but defiantly declared he had "nothing to be ashamed of". Chung was previously the convenor of Student Localism, a small group he set up five years ago as a secondary school pupil to advocate Hong Kong's independence from China.

Separation from China was then a fringe view in

Hong Kong although calls for self-rule became more vocal during huge and often violent democracy protests two years ago. Beijing imposed the security law on Hong Kong in response to those protests and Student Localism disbanded hours before it came into effect.

Authorities accused Chung of continuing to operate the group with the help of overseas activists and soliciting donations via PayPal—the foundation of the money laundering charge. Prosecutors said Chung's group published more than 1,000 social media posts that included calls to "get rid of Chinese Communist colonial rule" and "build a Hong Kong republic".

Some of the posts prosecutors cited dated back to before the security law's enactment, despite Hong Kong authorities promising that the law would not be retroactive. Yesterday Stanley Chan, one of a group of select judges picked by the government to try national security cases, said Chung's criminal intent was "clear for all to see" on social media, in interviews, at street booths and in schools.

"Even though he had no concrete plan, his objective was very clear," Chan said, handing

down a total sentence of 43 months. Chung—who has already spent more than a year in custody after he was arrested in October 2020 — did not visibly react to his sentencing, though he nodded and waved to acknowledge his supporters in the public gallery.

He was nabbed by plainclothes police from a coffee shop opposite the US consulate, where he was allegedly planning to seek asylum. The security law targets anything authorities deem subversion, terrorism or collusion with foreign forces.

Chung initially faced an additional charge of sedition and another count of money laundering but they were shelved following a plea bargain. In a separate case last December, Chung was jailed for four months for unlawful assembly and insulting China's national flag.

Four other men have so far been convicted in separate cases under the security law—mostly for their political views. More than 150 people have been arrested under the legislation, with around half charged. Bail is often denied and guilty pleas are a way to reduce both the end sentence and the legal costs of a long court battle. —AFP

Philippines accuses China of 'harassment' in disputed sea

MANILA: Manila's defence minister yesterday accused the Chinese coastguard of "intimidation and harassment" after Philippine navy personnel were filmed and photographed unloading goods in the disputed South China Sea.

Tensions over the resource-rich waters have spiked in the past week after Chinese coastguard ships fired water cannon at Philippine boats delivering supplies to marines at Second Thomas Shoal in the contested Spratly Islands.

Manila expressed outrage over the attack which forced the Philippine boats to abort their mission. But Beijing said the vessels had entered its waters without permission. China claims almost all of the waterway, through which trillions of dollars in trade passes annually, with competing claims from Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam.

Beijing has ignored a 2016 ruling by The Hague-based Permanent Court of Arbitration that its historical claim is without basis. Two civilian boats manned by Philippine Navy personnel made another attempt to reach the shoal and arrived "without any untoward incident" yesterday, Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana said. But three people in a rubber boat deployed by a nearby Chinese coastguard vessel took photos and videos as "personnel and cargo" were unloaded from the vessels, Lorenzana said. "I have communicated to the Chinese ambassador that we consider these acts as a form of intimidation and harassment," he added.

The Chinese embassy in Manila did not immediately respond to a request for comment. After China occupied Mischief Reef in the mid-1990s, the Philippines ran a derelict navy vessel aground on the nearby Second Thomas Shoal to assert Manila's territorial claim. Members of the Philippine marines are based there. Yesterday's incident came a day after Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte condemned the latest flare-up in the sea during an Asian regional summit hosted by Chinese President Xi Jinping.

"We abhor the recent event in the Ayungin Shoal and view with grave concern other similar developments," Duterte told the meeting, using the Philippines' name for the shoal. "This does not speak well of the relations between our nations and our partnership."

Duterte's remarks were unusually strong for a leader who has fostered warmer ties with Beijing since taking power in 2016 in the hope of extracting promised investment and trade. —AFP

UN appeal for Afghan aid meets \$600mn target

GENEVA: The United Nations said yesterday that its flash appeal for more than \$600 million to support the humanitarian response in Afghanistan until the end of the year was now fully funded. According to the UN, Afghanistan is on the brink of a humanitarian catastrophe, with more than half of its population at risk of not having enough to eat during the coming winter.

Following the Taliban takeover of the country in August, the UN held a ministerial meeting in Geneva in September, asking international donors for urgent support. "We can now report that the flash appeal is 100 percent funded," Jens Laerke, a spokesman for the UN humanitarian agency OCHA, told reporters in Geneva.

The main donors were the United States, European countries and Japan, who helped reached the total funding goal of \$606 million (539 million euros). The funds are directed towards helping the 11 million most deprived people in Afghanistan.

Laerke said that between September 1 and November 15, the UN and its non-governmental organisation partners provided food assistance to 7.2 million people. They also provided healthcare to nearly 900,000 people. Nearly 200,000 drought-affected people have been assisted with water trucking and 178,000 children under the age of five have been treated for acute malnutrition, he added.

"However, not all funding has been translated



KABUL: File photo shows an Afghan woman, wearing the Taliban-imposed burqa, waits near a militiaman to receive a blanket, a quilt and warm clothes from aid workers as part of a UN winter relief distribution program. —AFP

into action because of the crisis in Afghanistan's banking and financial system. And half of the population still need emergency aid," he said. Laerke added that access had recently improved and the humanitarian effort now had access to all areas in Afghanistan.

"The big problem now is impeding the economic collapse of the country," he said. Afghanistan's food

shortage is caused by a drought coupled with an economic crisis that has deepened since the Taliban took power.

The financial crunch was aggravated after Washington froze about \$10 billion of assets held in its reserve for Kabul and deteriorated further after the World Bank and International Monetary Fund halted Afghanistan's access to funding. —AFP

Great Green Wall brings life back to Niger desert

SIMIRI, Niger: Once a desolate landscape, the Simiri plateau in Niger is now a small paradise for fauna and flora. Goats crunch acacia seeds, squirrel and partridge prints dot the ground, praying mantises hang from trees and swarms of grasshoppers devour the verdant foliage.

"A small forest has miraculously been reborn," marvelled Simiri mayor Moussa Adamou. The trans-

formation is part of the African Union's Great Green Wall project, which aims to restore 100 million hectares of dry land by 2030 along an 8,000-kilometre (5,000-mile) strip stretching from Senegal in the west to Djibouti in the east.

Arable land is prized in landlocked Niger, where desert covers three-quarters of the territory and 80 percent of the population lives on subsistence farming. The World Bank predicts its population will rise from 23 million in 2019 to 30 million in 2030 and 70 million in 2050, underlining the vital importance of the Green Wall's success.

Niger's contribution is mainly made up of white gum and Bauhinia rufescens trees, two drought-resistant species that can grow 12 metres (40 feet) tall. Armed with pickaxes and spades, villagers built

earthen embankments that hold rainwater around the saplings longer to ensure they grow even during droughts.

"Their leaves and seeds are rich in protein for livestock," explained local farmer Garba Moussa. "Cooked or dried, we also eat them as survival food during severe food shortages," he added. Mayor Adamou said that game animals and even giraffes have been leaving their remote habitat south of the capital Niamey to savour the tender acacia leaves since the Simiri plateau reforestation programme started in 2013.

Niger's southern forests have lost one-third of their surface area and now make up only one to two percent of the country, according to the United Nations Environment Programme. By 2030, Niger

aims to "green" 3.6 million hectares of land, which represents more than 37.5 percent of its territory, said Maisharou Abdou, the Green Wall's director-general in Niger.

Abdou said between eight and 12 percent of the total had been achieved by 2020, but emphasised the project was "a long-distance race". Mouhamadou Souley, head of the anti-desertification services, added that work had already begun to extend Simiri's reforestation by another 65 hectares.

To achieve this dream, the country—one of the world's poorest—needs more than 454.645 billion CFA francs (\$780 million), he added. The European Union, UN Food and Agriculture Organization, World Bank and other donors have already given money. —AFP