



Kyrgyzstan detains 15 in 'coup plot' before vote

Thousands join global outcry over violence against women

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ROME: French President Emmanuel Macron (L) and Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi shake hands as they hold a joint press conference after signing the Quirinal Treaty between Italy and France. —AFP

Italy, France sign 'historic' treaty

'Historic moment' to favour and accelerate the process of European integration

ROME: France and Italy on Friday drew a line under recent tensions and signed a new treaty to formalise their relations, against the background of a European Union in flux. French President Emmanuel Macron and Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi put pen to paper at the Quirinale palace of President Sergio Mattarella.

An aerial acrobatic display by both countries' air forces followed. At a press conference, the leaders of the two Mediterranean powers long bound by historical, cultural and linguistic ties emphasised their closeness but also their joint commitment to the wider EU project.

Draghi called it a "historic moment", which "intends to favour and accelerate the process of European integration". Macron said the treaty "seals a deep friendship". "Founding countries of the EU... we defend a more integrated, more democratic, more sovereign Europe," he added.

The treaty was signed just weeks before France takes over the rotating EU presidency in January, and at a time of change on the continent. Britain's messy exit and rows between the EU's liberal democracies and their eastern neighbours have roiled the bloc, while its de facto leader, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, is finally bowing out fol-

lowing September elections. The so-called Quirinale Treaty is wide-ranging, covering the economy and industry, culture and education, security, cross-border cooperation and foreign affairs. Macron noted the two countries had had "difficult moments", likely a reference to a diplomatic crisis in early 2019 when Italy's then populist government openly criticised the French president.

Ties improved with a new government in Rome later that year and have gone from strength to strength with the arrival in office earlier this year of Draghi, a former European Central Bank chief. Draghi thanked Macron for

handing over former members of the far-left Red Brigades group that terrorised Italy in the 1970s and 1980s. Their safe haven for decades in France had been a long-standing source of tension.

There has also been simmering irritation in Italy over feelings it has been left by European allies to face tens of thousands of migrants from North Africa who arrive on its shores each year. Draghi said both sides agreed on the need for a shared EU migration and asylum policy. Macron later had a private audience with Pope Francis, with a child abuse scandal engulfing the Catholic Church in France. —AFP

South Africa calls travel bans 'draconian and unjustified'

JOHANNESBURG: South Africa's health ministry on Friday attacked a global rush to impose travel bans to slow the spread of a new COVID variant as "draconian," unscientific and contrary to WHO advice. The new strain, named Omicron, has been blamed for a surge in cases in South Africa, but has already cropped up in Hong Kong, Belgium, Israel and Botswana.

"We believe that some of the reactions have been unjustified," Health Minister Joe Phaahla told a news conference, accusing some leaders whom he did not name of seeking a "scapegoat." Britain was the first to slap a flight ban from countries in southern Africa, just hours after South Africa revealed it had detected the variant which has multiple mutations.

Austria, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and the US among others on Friday joined Britain in restricting flights from the region.

The European Commission, the executive arm of the 27-nation European Union, also proposed a complete suspension of flights to and from southern Africa until there was a "clear understanding about the danger" posed by the new variant.

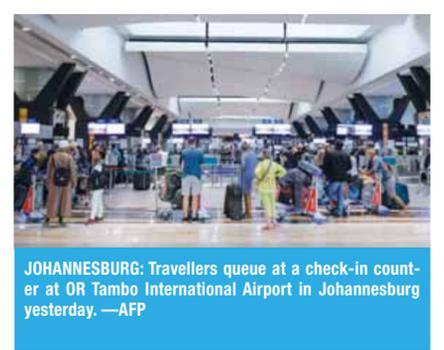
However, the UN's World Health Organization (WHO) on Friday urged against travel curbs at this stage. The agency cautioned that it could take several weeks to find out whether the newly-discovered mutations made the virus more virulent or transmissible. Phaahla said that bans were "a wrong approach-it's misdirected and goes against the norms and advice by the WHO". "We feel some of the leadership of countries are finding scapegoats to deal with what is a worldwide problem," he said.

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson spoke to President Cyril Ramaphosa in a call earlier Friday, his office said. "They discussed the challenges posed globally by the new COVID-19 variant, and ways to work together to deal with it and reopen international travel," a Downing Street spokesperson said in a statement. "The Prime Minister commended South Africa's rapid genomic sequencing and leadership in transparently sharing scientific data".

Comparing daily infections in South Africa and some European countries, the minister Phaahla said the ban "really doesn't look scientific". He said it was ironic that "some of the countries... now reacting in this draconian manner" had infection rates of upwards of 50,000 new cases per day. That compares to South Africa which reported nearly 3,000 daily cases on Friday, up from around 300 daily cases two weeks ago. "That kind of reaction is knee-jerk and panic," he said. Such responses could prompt countries to shy away from reporting new findings, he warned.

"It's a very counter-productive reaction because what it says is if you have the capability to do genomic sequencing and have high level of efficiency... those capabilities must be driven underground," said the minister. People will "feel that it is a risk to disclose" their findings, he argued. Tulio de Oliveira, a leading virologist who announced the discovery of the Omicron variant, slammed the "radical decision" to halt flights. "Sometimes one gets punished for being transparent, and doing things very quick," he told the same news conference.

He said he did not believe travel bans were effective, citing the US, the first country to have imposed



JOHANNESBURG: Travellers queue at a check-in counter at OR Tambo International Airport in Johannesburg yesterday. —AFP

a travel ban on China at the onset of the pandemic, but ended up with the highest numbers of infections. "So scientifically it (does) not make much sense. A lot of time people take decisions based on emotions not rationality," he said. The restrictions have sent shockwaves through South Africa's tourist industry, which has been looking to visitors from the wealthier northern hemisphere to bring in desperately-needed income. —AFP

Algerians vote in polls to seal post Bouteflika 'change'

ALGIERS: Algerians began voting yesterday in local elections seen as key in President Abdelmadjid Tebboune's push to turn the page on the two-decade rule of late president Abdelaziz Bouteflika. But despite official campaigns urging Algerians to "make their mark", the vote for municipal and provincial councils has sparked little public interest. The election is the third vote in Algeria under Tebboune, who has vowed to reform state institutions inherited from Bouteflika, an autocrat who ruled the country for two decades.

Observers are predicting a low turnout, as with the poorly attended elections since Bouteflika was driven from power by the Hirak pro-democracy protest movement in April 2019. The North African country's rulers are trying to "impose their will despite the embarrassing results of previous elections", said analyst Mohamed Hennad. Polling stations opened at 8:00 am (0700 GMT) and are scheduled to close at 7:00 pm. More than 23 million people are eligible to vote, with 15,230 candidates standing and results expected today.

Tebboune, members of his family as well as the army's chief of staff and other government officials were among the

first to vote. Campaigning had been muted despite calls by authorities on Algerians to take part if they "want change" and "institution building". "Nothing will change," said Omar, an engineer who said he would not cast a ballot. Yacine, a teacher, said he would be voting for rivals of the current Algiers mayor "even if I have no illusions" that they will be better.

'Facade'

Tebboune was elected in a contentious, widely boycotted 2019 ballot months after Bouteflika stepped down under pressure from the army and Hirak rallies.

He has vowed to break with local and regional elections marred by widespread claims of fraud in the era of Bouteflika, who died in September at the age of 84. In a televised interview on Friday, Tebboune, a former prime minister under the late autocrat, called on Algerians to participate actively in the vote. "If the people want change it is time they do something about it themselves by voting," he said.

Algeria's local assemblies elect two-thirds of members of the national parliament's upper house, with the president appointing the remainder. Redouane Boudjemaa, a journalism professor at the University of Algiers, said the vote was simply "an attempt to clean up the facade of local councils by changing their members, to benefit the ruling class". "Politics at the moment is limited to slogans proclaiming that the country has entered a new era, while all

indicators point to the contrary."

'No vision'

Tebboune pushed through an amended constitution in November 2020, approved by less than 24 percent of the electorate, and oversaw a parliamentary election that saw just 23 percent of voters take part. His rule has seen a crackdown on journalists and Hirak activists, even as he has packaged major policy moves as responses to the calls by the protest movement for reform.

He has also faced a diplomatic crisis with Algeria's colonial ruler France and is embroiled in a diplomatic crisis with neighboring Morocco, with which Algiers severed diplomatic ties in August over the disputed territory of Western Sahara. Boudjemaa said the main issue at stake was the "huge economic and social challenges of the coming year". "Several indicators show that the pouvoir (ruling elite) has neither the vision nor the strategy to respond to the crisis," he said.

The analyst Hennad said the elite in power since Algeria's independence from France in 1962, was using slogans around change to impose its agenda, without truly engaging other political forces. Despite a declared boycott by the opposition Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD), party activists are standing on independent lists, setting up a showdown with the rival Front of Socialist Forces (FFS) in the Kabylie region that often sees significant abstentions. —AFP

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K.S. Sankaran
for his sudden and untimely
demise on 26th November.

Sincere prayers to the management and staff of
AFCONS Infrastructure Ltd
Mumbai
for their irreplaceable loss

May his soul Rest in Peace