

## International

# Sydney gets 'blueprint for freedom' as virus cases fall

## Australia grappling with winter spike

**SYDNEY:** Vaccinated Sydney residents will finally emerge from a lengthy COVID lockdown by mid-October, Australian officials said yesterday, outlining a three-stage "blueprint for freedom" as case numbers fell in the city. Stay-at-home orders are set to be lifted in Sydney and surrounding New South Wales when the double-dose vaccination rate hits 70 percent, with state premier Gladys Berejiklian saying "quite confidently" that was now expected to occur on October 11.

Shuttered pubs, restaurants and shops will be allowed to reopen to the vaccinated while friends and families living across Australia's biggest city will be able to reunite for the first time in more than three months. "It is just this week and next week that we have to hang in there for," Berejiklian said. "We are nearly, nearly there, and let's not give up at the last minute." Deputy Premier John Barilaro said the "blueprint for freedom" would allow travel across New South Wales under its second stage - once 80 percent of over-16s are fully vaccinated - which is likely by the end of October.

Restrictions on guest numbers at funerals and weddings would be lifted at the same time, while sporting fixtures would also be permitted to resume. However, unvaccinated adults will need to wait until at least December 1 to enjoy the same eased restrictions under the road map's third stage, when it is predicted that around 90 percent of the eligible population will be vaccinated, officials said. "I think today is a very disappointing

day for those who aren't vaccinated. They will have to wait five or six weeks after others (for freedoms)," Berejiklian said.

### 'Through the roof'

The announcement came as new daily cases dipped below 800 in New South Wales yesterday - down from peaks of around 1,500 earlier in September - and the number of adults with at least one vaccine dose reached 85 percent.

Berejiklian warned that hospitals still faced



### Case numbers falls in the city

being overwhelmed by a surge in COVID-19 patients in the coming weeks. "We know that once we start reopening at 70 percent (fully vaccinated) that the case numbers will go through the roof," she said. "But what will protect us is the fact that so many people have received at least the first dose of the vaccine and those people will have that



**SYDNEY:** Mounted police patrol near the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) headquarters in Sydney amid a demonstration call by construction workers against COVID-19 restrictions. —AFP

extra layer of protection against ending up in hospital or worse."

Australia has been grappling with a winter spike in the highly contagious Delta coronavirus variant that forced its two biggest cities, Sydney and Melbourne, into months-long lockdowns. But a once-sluggish vaccine rollout has picked up pace

across the country, prompting leaders to outline cautious reopening plans including the mooted resumption of international travel by the end of this year. Authorities also announced yesterday that stay-at-home orders will be lifted in Canberra on October 15 with bars, beauty salons and gyms among the businesses set to reopen. —AFP

### News in brief

#### Ex-PMs get new jail terms

**ALGIERS:** Two detained former prime ministers under Algeria's longtime ex-president Abdelaziz Bouteflika were handed additional prison sentences yesterday for corruption, local media reported. Ahmed Ouyahia and Abdelmalek Sellal were sentenced to six and five years respectively for money laundering, wasting public money, abuse of office and "awarding contracts in violation of public procurement regulations", according to the newspapers Ennahar, Echorouk and El Hayat. The charges related to Hamid Melzi, the former boss of a state firm that runs a luxury residence for government officials as well as a publicly owned hotel company. Melzi was sentenced to five years in prison, and also faces trial for industrial espionage and "harming the national economy". —AFP

#### Socialists win in Portugal

**LISBON:** The ruling Socialists won municipal elections in Portugal, but suffered a surprise defeat by a right-wing coalition in the capital Lisbon, according to official results yesterday. Prime Minister Antonio Costa's Socialist party had hoped to ride the success of a vaccine campaign that has seen the country clock some of the highest inoculation rates in the world. Last week, his government said almost all Covid restrictions would be lifted from October 1 after infections dropped in recent months. Costa's camp garnered 34.4 percent of Sunday's vote and won in at least 147 municipalities, out of a total of 308 up for grabs. His centre-right rivals led by former Porto mayor Rui Rio took 30.8 percent of the vote and 108 municipalities. The Socialists, who won 2013 and 2017 municipal elections, did not expect to fare as well as they did four years ago when they secured a record high number of votes. —AFP

#### Strong quake hits Crete

**ATHENS:** A strong earthquake struck the Greek island of Crete yesterday, killing a man who was working in a church that collapsed and injuring 11 others, officials said. The quake, measuring magnitude 5.8 according to Greece's seismological observatory, sent panicked residents rushing into the streets and damaged buildings on Greece's largest island. It struck at 9:17 am, 23 kilometers from the Crete capital of Heraklion. "So far, one man is dead and 11 people are in hospital suffering mostly from fractures, according to a spokesman from the National Centre for Emergency Care. Spiros Georgiou, spokesman for the civil protection agency, had earlier said nine people were slightly injured in the farming town of Arkalochori which was particularly badly hit. —AFP

#### Kidnapped students freed

**KANO:** Gunmen who kidnapped more than 100 students from a school in northwest Nigeria more than two months ago released 10 more of the hostages after ransom payment, the head of a parents association said Sunday. Assailants stormed Bethel Baptist High School on July 5 on the outskirts of Kaduna city, abducting 121 students who were sleeping in their dorms. The Bethel abduction was one of a string of kidnappings by armed gangs known locally as bandits who terrorize northwest and central Nigeria, looting, stealing cattle and kidnapping. The gangs have recently been targeting schools and colleges, seizing students to extract ransoms out of parents and authorities. —AFP

## After brief arrest, Catalan separatist leader in Brussels

**MADRID:** Exiled former Catalan leader Carles Puigdemont was back in Belgium yesterday after his arrest in Italy but will return at the weekend for a hearing over a Spanish extradition request, his lawyer said. "He is in Brussels and will return to Sardinia on Sunday," Gonzalo Boye said. A member of the European Parliament, Puigdemont was arrested in Sardinia on Thursday evening and spent the night in prison before a brief court hearing a day later.

The 58-year-old is wanted by Madrid on charges of sedition for leading a failed Catalan bid to declare independence from Spain in October 2017, fleeing to Belgium to avoid prosecution. Italian judges must now decide whether he should be extradited, with the court in the northern town of Sassari saying he was free to leave but must return for the hearing on October 4. Following his release late on Friday,

Puigdemont said he would return to Brussels, where he has been based since late 2017. His lawyer in Sardinia has insisted there was no basis for his arrest, nor for his extradition.

### Immunity lifted in March

Despite a ban by Madrid, Catalonia's separatist regional government tried to stage an independence referendum in 2017, which was marred by police violence. Several weeks later, he issued a short-lived declaration of independence, triggering a huge political crisis in Spain, and prompting Puigdemont and several others to flee abroad.

Those who stayed behind were arrested and put on trial, with nine of them jailed for between nine and 13 years. Although they were pardoned earlier this year, Madrid still wants Puigdemont and the others to face justice over the secession bid.



**ALGERO:** Exiled former Catalan president Carles Puigdemont arrives for a convention in Alghero, on the island of Sardinia. —AFP

This is the third time Puigdemont has been arrested since he fled Spain, the first was when he arrived in Brussels, and the second was in Germany in March 2018, when it took the courts nearly four months to return him to full freedom.

Although he enjoyed immunity for a time after being elected a MEP in 2019, it was lifted by the European

Parliament in March in a decision upheld in July by the EU's General Court. The decision also affects former Catalan regional ministers Toni Comin and Clara Ponsati, both of whom are wanted by Spain. However, they are appealing against the European Parliament's decision and a final ruling by the EU court has yet to be made. —AFP

## Mali learner drivers undeterred by noisy and chaotic roads

**BAMAKO:** Oumou Toure is behind the wheel in Mali's bustling capital Bamako, her eyes flitting left and right as motorbikes swarm up from behind like hornets to overtake her. "The one thing which scares me is that no-one around here respects the highway code," she says, her face concentrated. Toure, who is in her twenties, has passed the "theory" - a test of road safety knowledge.

After a handful of driving lessons, she can apply to do the "practical," in which the driver's skills are tested by an examiner and is the final step to getting a licence. Roads in the Sahel state are notoriously noisy and chaotic: They are often unsealed, plagued by daredevil drivers and prone to wandering cows and sheep. Hundreds of people perish in accidents every year. The problem is particularly acute in Bamako, a sprawling city of about 3.5 million people, where only the main arteries are tarmacked and road signs are negligible.

Drivers have to watch out for the ubiquitous motorbikes, which zigzag in and out of traffic, as well as clapped-out minibuses spewing noxious black smoke and careering at breakneck speed around the potholes. Abdramane Dama, who heads a driving school in Bamako, says that driving-theory instruction is "just like in Europe". "The learning to drive part is



**BAMAKO:** Cars belonging to the Kanaga driving school are pictured in the Badalabougou neighborhood of Bamako. —AFP

another matter," he adds. Bogus instructors are legion, and learner drivers often only have to parallel-park successfully in order to pass the "practical."

Over 600 people died on Mali's roads last year, according to the country's road-safety agency, with thousands of more injured in accidents. The nation of 19 million people had a road-fatality rate of 23 deaths per 100,000 in 2019, according to the World Bank. The world average is 16 per 100,000 - while the lowest is in Switzerland, with just two. The bloodbath attracts little serious attention in a poor country that has been battling a jihadist insurgency

since 2012 that has killed thousands. immediately clear what caused the derailment. The National Transportation and Safety Board said it was launching a "go-team" to investigate the derailment.

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Once a rarity, driving schools are now booming in Mali, catering for the millions of young people - the minimum age for driving is 18 - who crave a licence, often to find work. Djigui Camara, the head of the national driving schools' association, told AFP that there are now about 300 schools nationwide compared to about a dozen in 2000. But the sector is poorly regulated and most of the schools are illegal, often hiring instructors without qualifications, he says. "Everyone on the road should go through a certified driving school," Camara says. —AFP

## 3 dead, dozens injured as US train derails

**WASHINGTON:** Amtrak on Sunday expressed condolences to the families of those killed when a train derailed the day before in northern Montana, saying it was "fully cooperating" with an investigation into the deadly incident. "We have no words that can adequately express our sorrow for those who lost a loved one or who were hurt in this horrible event," the US rail operator's CEO, Bill Flynn, said in a statement.

Around 141 passengers and 16 crew members were traveling from Chicago towards the Pacific coast on Saturday afternoon when eight of the 10 cars came off the tracks at around 4:00 pm, killing

three people and injuring dozens more. "We are fully cooperating with the investigation, working closely with National Transportation Safety Board, the Federal Railroad Administration, local law enforcement and response agencies," Flynn said.

"We share the sense of urgency to understand why the accident happened; however, until the investigation is complete, we will not comment further on the accident itself." Rescuers rushed to evacuate everyone on board after the derailment, with Amtrak later saying local authorities had confirmed "that three people have lost their lives as a result of this accident," adding there were also "reported injuries."

Footage posted on social media showed people waiting by the tracks, luggage strewn next to them, with train carriages seen listing off the rails and at least one toppled onto its side. Flynn said the company was working to support passengers and crew and had set up an incident response team to help those who had been on board the train. It was not

immediately clear what caused the derailment. The National Transportation and Safety Board said it was launching a "go-team" to investigate the derailment.

### 'Over 50 people' injured

Montana's Disaster and Emergency Services coordinator Amanda Frickel on Saturday told The New York Times that "well over 50 people had been injured." She said teams of rescuers were at the scene and multiple hospitals - as well as medical helicopters - were on standby. Authorities were not releasing further details for the time being, she said, adding: "Everybody who is alive has been extricated from the wreck."

The Empire Builder train derailed in a remote area near Joplin, Montana, a town of around 200 people near the border with Canada. Montana Senator Jon Tester said he was monitoring the derailment. "My thoughts are with all the passengers, crew, and first responders on the scene," he added. —AFP