

International

China population to begin shrinking by 2025: Officials

Total fertility rate has dropped below 1.3 in recent years

BEIJING: China's population will begin to shrink by 2025, officials have said, as family sizes grow smaller and citizens age. The world's most-populous country has been grappling with a looming demographic crisis as it faces a rapidly ageing workforce, slowing economy and its weakest population growth in decades.



Families are becoming smaller

And although officials relaxed the nation's strict "one-child policy" in 2016 and last year allowed couples to have three children, the birth rate has plunged to a record low. "The growth rate of the total population has slowed down significantly, and it will enter a stage of negative growth in the '14th Five-Year Plan' period," the National Health Commission said Monday, referring to the period between 2021 and 2025.

In January, authorities said that forecasts expected the population to enter zero growth "or even negative growth" in that five-year span. "Presently, our country's policy system for childbirth support is not perfect, and there is a big gap with population development and the

people's expectations," the NHC said in its latest report.

The total fertility rate has dropped below 1.3 in recent years, it added, while the country is expected to enter a stage of severe ageing around 2035, with more than 30 percent of the population older than 60. Families are also becoming smaller, "weakening" the functions of pension and childcare, the health commission said, calling for improving child-raising support and for policies on housing, education and taxation to help reduce burdens on families.

Authorities in some parts of China are already introducing family-friendly policies in a bid to combat the slowing birth rate. The eastern city of Hangzhou announced Monday that families with three children would be able to borrow 20 percent more than the maximum limit when applying for housing provident fund loans for the first time.

Other cities like Nanchang and Changsha have also rolled out supportive policies, according to state media. Higher costs of living and a cultural shift as people gravitate toward smaller families have been cited as reasons behind the lower number of babies.

The "one-child policy" was introduced by top leader Deng Xiaoping in 1980 to curb population growth and promote economic development, with some exceptions made for rural families and ethnic minorities.

The global population is expected to hit eight billion in November 2022, according to UN projections, with India on course to surpass China as the world's most-populous country in 2023. — AFP



BEIJING: A woman pushes a trolley with twins along a street in Beijing on August 2, 2022. China's population will begin to shrink by 2025, officials said. — AFP

Imran Khan's party accepted illegal donations

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan: Pakistan's ex-premier Imran Khan's party accepted millions of dollars in illegal funds from foreign individuals and groups, the election commission ruled Tuesday. The case dates back to 2014 when a disgruntled founding member of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) filed a case against his party leadership accusing it of financial irregularities.

The Election Commission Pakistan found that Khan's party concealed 16 bank accounts and accepted donations from foreigners or foreign groups based in Australia, Canada, the UAE and the Cayman Islands. Pakistani law bars political parties from receiving funds and donations from foreign individuals and companies.

The commission also said that financial details submitted by Khan were "found to be grossly inaccurate". Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif — who came into power in April after Khan's ouster — said the commission's verdict showed "yet again that he (Khan) is a certified liar".

"(The) Nation should ponder over the implications of his politics funded by foreigners," Sharif said in a tweet Tuesday. The party has denied the accusations. Responding to the decision, senior PTI leader Fawad

Chaudhry said the party had taken funds from "overseas Pakistanis", not foreign nationals.

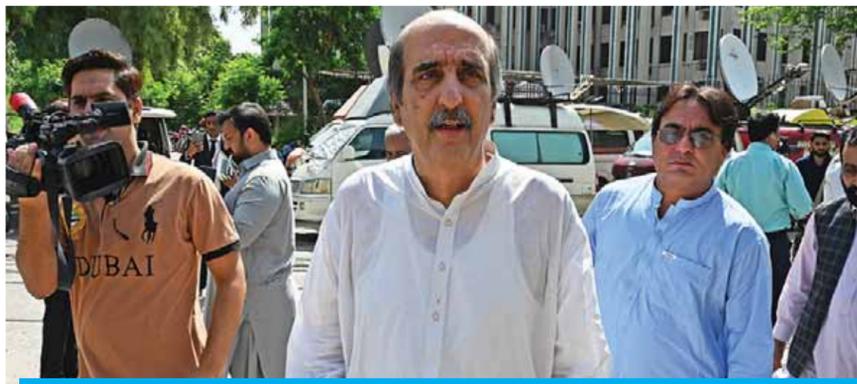
"Overseas Pakistanis are the backbone of Pakistan's economy, and we would continue to rely on them for funding," Chaudhry told reporters. Cricket star-turned-politician Khan swept into power in 2018 thanks to an electorate weary of the dynastic politics of the country's two major parties, with the popular former sports star promising to sweep away decades of entrenched corruption and cronyism.

But in April, he was kicked out following a no-confidence vote — brought down in part by his failure to rectify the country's dire economic situation, including its crippling debt, shrinking foreign currency reserves and soaring inflation.

He also reportedly fell out with the country's powerful military. Khan has since staged a series of rallies, touting a claim he was pushed out of office in a "foreign conspiracy" and heaping pressure on a coalition of former opposition parties now in power. PTI has been sent a notice to explain the prohibited funds, or it can challenge the order in court.

The commission meanwhile could pursue confiscating the prohibited funds, while the government could take the case to the Supreme Court to ban Khan's PTI party. However, legal expert Osama Malik said: "Politically it would not be an ideal precedent for one group of political parties to ban their rivals."

The commission is also investigating a foreign funding case against two other major political parties — Sharif's ruling PML-N and its coalition partner Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP). Both parties deny the claims. — AFP



ISLAMABAD: The main petitioner Akbar S Babar (C), a disgruntled founding member of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) who filed a case against his party leadership accusing it of financial irregularities, arrives at the Pakistan's election commission office in Islamabad. — AFP

HK court ruling to lift lid on national security cases

HONG KONG: A Hong Kong court delivered a landmark ruling on Tuesday that will help lift the lid on secrecy-shrouded pre-trial hearings held under a national security law. The security law was imposed by Beijing after huge democracy protests and has largely snuffed out dissent in the city.

About 100 people have been charged under the law with the vast majority denied bail, held for months — some more than a year — in pre-trial detention. Precedent-setting decisions have been made in lengthy pre-trial hearings but the media have been unable to cover legal arguments because of strict reporting restrictions, even though multiple defendants have asked for them to be lifted.

On Tuesday, High Court judge Alex Lee ruled that if a defendant asks, the restrictions must be lifted around hearings and proceedings for referring a case to the High Court. The magistrate has no right to refuse "to lift the reporting restrictions at the instance of the accused," Lee wrote in his judgement.

The ruling will set a precedent for other cases and should allow the media to report more details on how the national security law is being applied. China says

the security law was needed to restore stability after huge and sometimes violent democracy protests in 2019. Critics say it has dealt a blow to Hong Kong's freedoms and transformed the city's legal landscape — a bedrock of its business hub reputation. Tuesday's successful appeal was brought by Chow Hang-tung, a prominent jailed democracy activist and lawyer.

Chow was also a key organiser of Hong Kong's annual commemorations of the deadly 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown, a huge pro-democracy event outlawed since the protests. Last September, she and two other Tiananmen vigil leaders, Lee Cheuk-yan and Albert Ho, were charged with "incitement to subversion", which carries up to a decade in jail under the security law.

While members of the public have been allowed to attend pre-trial hearings in the past year, reporting has largely been limited to names, hearing dates and what a judge rules. Tuesday's ruling is expected to affect the biggest national security trial currently winding its way through the courts — the prosecution of 47 prominent activists on subversion charges.

Four defendants in that case recently made an application to remove reporting restrictions. The group is charged with subversion for joining a primary election to choose opposition candidates. The majority have been in custody for over a year and the few granted bail must adhere to strict speech curbs. Hong Kong authorities say the court tried to topple the government. Those on trial counter they were engaging in legal politics and that their prosecution reveals how far freedoms have faltered in Hong Kong. — AFP

Russia's Lavrov to visit Myanmar

MOSCOW: Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov will travel to Myanmar on Wednesday for meetings with the conflict-racked country's junta leaders, his ministry said. As Moscow's ties with the West unravel over the intervention in Ukraine, the Kremlin is seeking to pivot the country towards the Middle East, Asia, and Africa.

"Talks are planned with the foreign minister and with the Myanmar leadership," foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova told reporters on Tuesday. She added that defence and security cooperation would be on the agenda among other topics.

Russia and its ally China have been accused of arming Myanmar's junta with weapons used to attack civilians since last year's coup. More than 1,500 civilians have been killed in a military crackdown since the coup on February 1, 2021.

Last week, the announcement of the junta's execution of four democracy activists was condemned by the UN Security Council in a rare consensus on the post-coup crisis. The statement was endorsed by Russia and China — the junta's two allies that have previously shielded it at the UN.

Myanmar junta chief Min Aung Hlaing was in Moscow on a "private" visit in July and reportedly met officials from Moscow's space and nuclear agencies. In July, Lavrov visited Egypt, Congo-Brazzaville, Uganda and Ethiopia.

Meanwhile, a bomb blast and a spate of shootings in a Myanmar-China border town have killed two people and wounded at least nine, rescue workers and locals said on Tuesday. No group has so far claimed the attacks in Muse, Myanmar's main gateway to China, which is home to several militia groups jockeying for control over lucrative casinos and the drug trade.

One woman died and five people were wounded in a bomb attack on a police traffic post on Monday, said a local NGO worker who requested anonymity. Later that night, the police station was attacked "with small arms and heavy weapons", the worker said, killing another person and leaving four wounded.

A member of a volunteer rescue group who helped transport people to hospital confirmed the two deaths but put the wounded tolls higher, saying six people, five of them militia members, had been

injured in the bombing, and another five injured in the police station attack.

A separate, drive-by shooting on Tuesday morning injured two more suspected militia members, both the NGO worker and the rescuer said. Local media also reported the attacks. A police spokesman for the area could not be reached for comment.

Muse is home to several militia groups controlled by Myanmar's army — which has an agreement with China not to station troops along the border. The military uses the militias as proxies in a long-running conflict with ethnic rebel groups which operate in the area, including the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA).



Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov

TNLA spokesman Major Tar Aik Kyaw told AFP his group was not involved in the Muse attacks. Violence has soared across Myanmar since the military's coup last year, with the junta leading a bloody crackdown on dissent in addition to its long-running conflicts with the ethnic groups. Muse lies on the path of a proposed \$8.9 billion high-speed rail link from China's landlocked Yunnan province to Myanmar's west coast, part of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative.

But the region is awash with weapons and a centre for meth production as armed rebels and militias jostle for a share of any potential windfall. In 2018, two Chinese nationals were among 19 people killed when ethnic rebels attacked security force posts and a casino near Muse. — AFP

Sri Lanka brushes aside India concerns on Chinese ship

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka on Tuesday brushed aside Indian concerns over a scheduled visit by a Chinese ship, saying it was coming only to refuel and replenish supplies. The research and survey ship Yuan Wang 5 is due to dock in the Chinese-run Hambantota Port in southern Sri Lanka on August 11, according to analytics website MarineTraffic.

Indian media reports said that New Delhi was worried the vessel would be used to spy on its activities and that it had lodged a complaint with Colombo. It is a dual-use spy vessel, employed for space and satellite tracking and with specific usage in intercontinental ballistic missile launches, according to Indian broadcaster CNN-News18.

Sri Lankan government spokesman Bandula Gunawardena said that the cabinet discussed the ship's visit on Monday and that it would still be allowed to dock. "Both India and China are helping us at this very crucial time when we are facing an unprecedented economic crisis," Gunawardena said.

"The President (Ranil Wickremesinghe) informed the cabinet that this matter will be diplomatically resolved by talking to all sides. Both are important friends." The vessel is to spend about a week at Hambantota taking in fuel and other supplies and will not undertake any work

while in Sri Lankan waters, Gunawardena said. Another minister, Manusha Nanayakkara, told the same press conference that 18 previous such port visits to Sri Lanka had been made by Chinese research vessels and that the Yuan Wang 5 was stopping "only for bunkering". There was no immediate comment from the Indian High Commission in Colombo.

However, New Delhi last week made it clear that it will closely monitor "any bearing on India's security and economic interests and takes all necessary measures to safeguard them". India remains suspicious of China's growing influence in its southern neighbour Sri Lanka, which owes large amounts of money to Beijing for infrastructure projects, including the \$1.4-billion Hambantota Port.

Two Chinese submarines berthed in Sri Lanka in 2014 despite Indian objections. Since then, there have been no such Chinese submarine visits to Sri Lankan ports. Sri Lanka gave a Chinese company a 99-year lease on the port, located along the main East-West international shipping lanes, in 2017 after being unable to keep up with debt repayments on the facility.

Sri Lanka defaulted on its \$51 billion in foreign debts in April and has since opened bailout talks with the International Monetary Fund. The country's 22 million people have been enduring severe shortages of food, fuel and medicines since late last year when the government ran out of foreign exchange to finance most imports.

President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, whose brother Mahinda Rajapaksa borrowed heavily from China while president from 2005-15, was forced to flee and step down last month when protesters overran his palace. — AFP