

Sports

Djokovic admits 'errors' as he fights to avoid deportation

Team offers fresh information to Australian government

MELBOURNE: Novak Djokovic yesterday admitted "errors" in his travel papers and for not isolating after a claimed coronavirus infection, as he battled to stay in Australia and fight for a record 21st Grand Slam. The world number one said his team had offered fresh information to the Australian government, which is pondering whether to cancel his visa, again, and throw him out of the country.

"We are living in challenging times in a global pandemic and sometimes these mistakes can occur," the unvaccinated 34-year-old said in a statement released as he practiced on the courts of the Australian Open, which starts Monday. The Serbian star flew into Melbourne a week ago claiming a vaccine exemption because of a positive PCR test result on December 16. Border agents rejected his exemption saying a recent infection did not qualify, tore up his visa and placed him in a detention centre.

But the vaccine-sceptic Djokovic's high-powered legal team dramatically overturned the visa decision in court on Monday on a procedural matter related to his airport interview. Now, Immigration Minister Alex Hawke says he is considering cancelling the visa another time, as fresh doubts emerge. In an update to Australian media, his spokesman acknowledged receiving "lengthy further submissions" from the player's lawyers. "Naturally, this will affect the timeframe for a decision," he said.

'Error of judgment'

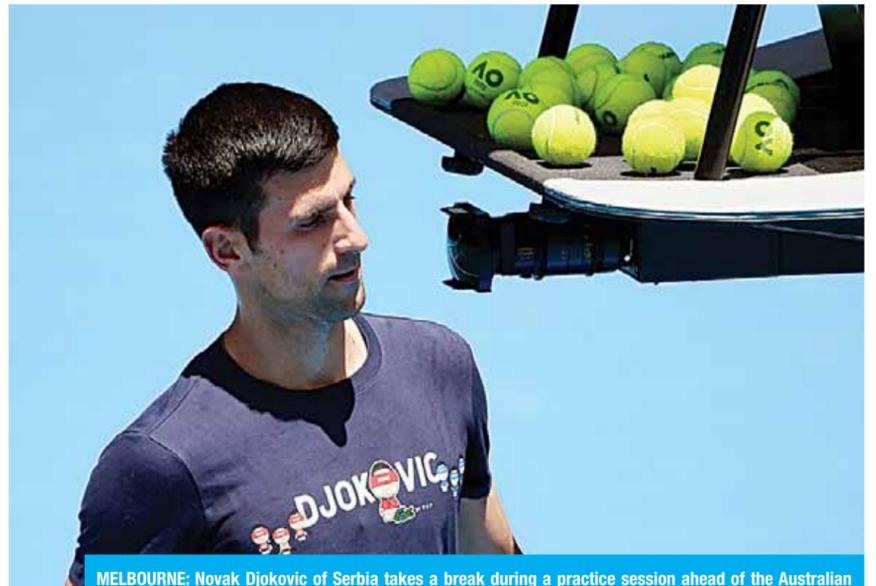
Djokovic, a nine-time Australian Open champion, described reports about his post-infection outings in Serbia as "misinformation". On the day of his claimed positive test in Serbia, he appeared at a ceremony to honor him with stamps bearing his image. The following day he attended a youth tennis event. He appeared at both apparently without a mask. Djokovic, who made no mention of the stamp ceremony, said he only received the PCR test result after attending the children's tennis event. But he admitted that he also went ahead with an interview and photoshoot with French sports newspaper L'Equipe on December 18.

"I felt obliged to go ahead and conduct the L'Equipe interview as I didn't want to let the journalist down but did ensure I socially distanced and wore a mask except when my photograph was being taken," he said. "On reflection, this was an error of judgment and I accept that I should have rescheduled this commitment." The player said he also had two rapid antigen tests, which both returned negative results: one on December 16 when he first suspected being infected and one on December 17 before attending the children's tennis event.

Fresh doubts emerge amid legal tussle

The tennis ace also admitted a mistake on his Australian travel declaration, in which a box was ticked indicating that he had not, or would not, travel in the 14 days before taking his flight to Melbourne. In fact, social media posts and reports show he flew from Serbia to Spain during that period. "This was submitted by my support team on my behalf," Djokovic said. "My agent sincerely apologizes for the administrative mistake in ticking the incorrect box about my previous travel before coming to Australia. This was a human error and certainly not deliberate."

In another twist, Australian media yesterday seized on reporting by Germany's Der Spiegel newspaper that cast doubt over the tennis star's positive test. The newspaper said it had scanned the QR code on Djokovic's Serbian PCR test, which it said delivered a negative result, only to change to a positive result an hour later. It was not possible to



MELBOURNE: Novak Djokovic of Serbia takes a break during a practice session ahead of the Australian Open at the Melbourne Park tennis centre in Melbourne yesterday. —AFP

independently verify the Der Spiegel story, and Djokovic did not refer to those specific issues yesterday.

Appeal options

Djokovic's Instagram post appeared to be aimed at swaying the Australian government to let him stay. Leading immigration lawyer Christopher Levingston said the government could cancel Djokovic's visa on narrow criminal grounds, for example, because the travel declaration was incorrectly completed. But the immigration minister may also annul the visa on broader character grounds. If Djokovic knowingly dodged Serbia's

quarantine requirement for positive cases, he could be judged to be a risk for potentially not complying with public health orders while in Australia, Levingston said.

Various options to appeal would be open for both Djokovic and the government, but at the end of the day, the immigration minister can exercise his personal power to cancel the visa. Many Australians, who have endured nearly two years of travel bans, restrictions and rolling lockdowns, were angered when they learned of Djokovic's vaccine exemption. Prime Minister Scott Morrison's government, which faces a general election by May, has been criticized over its handling of the affair. —AFP

Injury-hit England fighting to turn corner in Ashes climax

HOBART: A patched-up England head to an Ashes finale against Australia under lights in Hobart tomorrow buoyed by a fighting draw in Sydney, but consumed by injury worries and selection dilemmas. The tourists finally stopped the rot on a gruelling tour last week with their nail-biting last-wicket hold-out at the Sydney Cricket Ground to prevent a 5-0 whitewash. But it came at a price with wicketkeeper Jos Buttler sent home with a fractured finger and experienced pair Jonny Bairstow and Ben Stokes racing the clock to be fit.

England captain Joe Root said not losing was "hugely important" and he hoped it had turned the tide after three heavy and humiliating defeats in Brisbane, Adelaide and Melbourne. "It would have been very easy for us to roll over and feel sorry for ourselves," he said, after breaking Alastair Cook's record for most matches in charge when he captained England for the 60th time in Sydney.

"But it was up to the guys to put some pride back into the badge and show how much they care about playing for England." However, it can't disguise their still appalling record in Australia with 12 defeats in 14 Tests, with England reduced to celebrating a draw. Former skipper Michael Atherton said in a column for The Times this week that avoiding a whitewash was "a small mercy".

"Sober assessment of the fourth Test would stress that Australia declared in both innings and that there were two sessions lost to rain," he added. "England were second best by a yawning distance." Hobart's Bellerive Oval will play host to its first Ashes Test after winning the race to replace Perth, which was axed last month over Western Australia state's tough COVID quarantine rules. And it will be day-night pink-ball affair, the second of the series after Adelaide, where Australia crushed England by 275 runs.

At least the visitors can draw inspiration from a better batting performance in Sydney with Bairstow making England's first century of the series, while Stokes hit a fifty in each innings and opener Zak Crawley scored 77. But fellow opener Haseeb Hameed once more failed, with Rory Burns a potential replacement. With Buttler out, Bairstow could take the gloves, but he is battling a right thumb injury. As a precaution, England have called up Sam Billings, who has been playing for Sydney Thunder in the Big Bash League. —AFP

Vlhova seals slalom title; Shiffrin scores emotional victory

SCHLADMING: Mikaela Shiffrin charged from fifth to first on the second run to win the World Cup slalom in Schladming on Tuesday but could not stop Petra Vlhova clinching the discipline title. Shiffrin, who returned from a bout of Covid-19 on Sunday, was in tears at the finish. "Just crying a lot lately," she said at the start of a brief post-race interview. The American struck a psychological blow in the last slalom before the Beijing Olympic and increased her lead over Slovakian Vlhova in the overall standings and secured the outright record for World Cup victories in a single discipline.



Al-Osaimi commends activation of schedule

By Abdellatif Sharara

KUWAIT: Secretary General of Kuwait and Arab Shooting Federations Obaid Munahi Al-Osaimi commended the activation of the time schedule of the joint cooperation protocol between the National Guard and Kuwait Shooting Sport Club which was signed on January 11, 2011. This was the result of the support of HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah when he was Deputy Chief of the National Guard. He ordered the signing of a cooperation proto-

Vlhova, winner of five of the first six World Cup slaloms of the season, set the fastest time in the first run under lights in the Austrian Alps on Tuesday. Shiffrin, the only woman to have beaten Vlhova in the slalom this season was 0.48sec back in fifth. The race had been moved from Flachau because of the high rate of COVID-19 infection in the resort, some 25 kilometers to Schladming, which normally only hosts the men's slaloms.

Shiffrin rose to the challenge of a course that was steeper and longer than the regular stops on the women's circuit. "It's such a privilege to race on this slope. All I wanted to do today was to earn that, to deserve it," said Shiffrin at the finish. "It's iconic. It's Schladming. I was geeking out this morning. I can't believe that we can be here. It's quite special. It feels like it didn't happen." After Shiffrin seized the lead in the second run, the final four skiers struggled to match her.

Neither Canadian Ali Nullmeyer nor Swiss Wendy Holdener, who had been tied for third, fin-

ished. Nullmeyer went flying halfway through her run on a course laid out by her own coach. German Lena Duerr recorded only the 16th best second-run time, more than a second slower than Shiffrin, as she slipped from second to third. Skiing last, Vlhova lost more than half a second to finish 0.15sec behind, but that ensured she would win the small crystal globe for slalom World Cup champion regaining a title she won in 2020.

Vlhova leads Shiffrin by 220 points in the slalom standings with only two World Cup races left. Shiffrin, meanwhile, increased her lead over the Slovakian, the defending champion, to 55 points in the overall standings. For Shiffrin, the victory was her 47th in a World Cup slalom, breaking a tie with the legendary Swede Ingemar Stenmark, who won 46 giant slaloms, for most in a single discipline. Shiffrin said she was not thinking of records. "Maybe I'll be able to answer that in one year or in five years," she said. —AFP



lauded the role of the shooting club in providing all that necessary to train and develop the technical levels of the National Guard members.

Chinese cities battle COVID as Winter Olympics loom

BEIJING: China is battling coronavirus outbreaks in several cities, testing the country's strict "zero-COVID" strategy just weeks before Beijing hosts the Winter Olympics. Here's a rundown of the measures in place in key areas of the world's most populous nation.

Tianjin

Fears are growing about China's largest domestic Omicron cluster to date in the northern port city of Tianjin, where two confirmed cases of the highly transmissible variant were discovered over the weekend. Local virus prevention official Zhang

Ying said Saturday that the strain of virus identified had been transmitting for "at least three generations" - indicating weeks of earlier spread - with the source unclear.

Thirty-three new transmissions were reported in the city yesterday, as authorities launched a second round of mass testing for the 14 million population. Local officials said Tuesday that all 80 patients reported up to that point had received at least two doses of a vaccine. "We are highly concerned about whether the virus has spilled over to areas outside Tianjin... especially Beijing," Zhang said in a Monday interview with state broadcaster CCTV, adding that its rapid transmission has brought "unprecedented challenges".

Residents cannot leave the city without official permission, while an entire district and two nearby townships were locked down. Buses and flights out of the city were cancelled Tuesday, and schools and university campuses have been closed. While small, the Tianjin outbreak is noteworthy because of the city's proximity to Beijing just 150 kilometers away. Authorities have stepped up controls over transport links to

Beijing, with trains cancelled and highway checkpoints installed.

Xi'an

The historic city of 13 million people is in its third week of a strict lockdown as it races to stamp out a 2,000-case outbreak, one of the largest in China for months. Residents may not leave their homes or travel out of the city, famed for its Terracotta Warriors. Local authorities have come under fire for their handling of a lockdown that has included supply issues and medical tragedies. A top health official made a public apology last week over the miscarriage of an eight-month pregnant woman, after a viral video of her being refused entry to a hospital without a COVID test prompted outrage on social media.

Henan

Several cities in the central province of Henan - which lies near Xi'an - have strengthened virus controls in response to hundreds of new infections since late December. The province yesterday reported 87 new local cases. It is not clear how many

of these are Omicron cases. Provincial capital Zhengzhou has imposed a partial lockdown and ordered its nearly 13 million residents to get tested. Last week, one million people in Yuzhou city were put under stay-at-home orders. On Monday, the city of Anyang reported 18 local cases, including two Omicron infections linked to the Tianjin cluster. Authorities have since placed five million residents on lockdown, ordering them to stay at home, while transport links have been cut.

Beijing

The capital last week sealed off its Winter Olympics "closed loop", which will cocoon thousands of athletes and Games staff for weeks without direct physical access to the outside world. Anyone entering the bubble must be fully vaccinated or face a 21-day quarantine when they arrive. Everyone inside will be tested daily and must wear face masks at all times. The city has barred entry to people travelling from places that have recorded COVID cases in the last two weeks and requires all arrivals to show a negative test from the past 48 hours. —AFP