

International

South Africa's gutted justice system struggles to keep up

The number of murders rises 37 percent

News in brief

Storm kills 70 in Africa

ANTANANARIVO: The death toll from a storm that struck three southern African countries rose to 70 yesterday as emergency teams battled to repair damaged infrastructure and help tens of thousands of victims. Packing torrential rains, Tropical Storm Ana made landfall Monday in Madagascar before ploughing into Mozambique and Malawi. Rescue workers and authorities across the three countries were still assessing the full extent of the damage. Madagascar has reported 41 dead, with 18 others killed in Mozambique and 11 in Malawi. Remnants of the storm have passed over Zimbabwe, but no deaths have been reported there. In the three hardest-hit countries, tens of thousands of homes were damaged. Some collapsed under the heavy rain, trapping victims in the rubble. Bridges were washed away by swollen rivers, while livestock drowned and submerged fields, destroying the livelihoods of rural families. In Madagascar, 110,000 had to flee their homes. In the capital Antananarivo, schools and gyms were turned into emergency shelters. —AFP

Beijing warns Washington

BEIJING: China's top diplomat spoke with his US counterpart yesterday, warning Washington to "stop interfering" in the Winter Olympics and stressing that Russia's security concerns in Europe should be "taken seriously". Beijing hopes to turn next week's Games into a soft power triumph. But the lead-up has been clouded by a US-led diplomatic boycott over China's human rights record, particularly towards its Uyghur Muslim minority in the Xinjiang region. "The most urgent priority right now is that the US should stop interfering in the Beijing Winter Olympics," foreign minister Wang Yi said during a call with Secretary of State Antony Blinken, according to a foreign ministry statement. He added that Washington must also "stop playing with fire" on the Taiwan issue. Both officials also discussed the growing tensions in Europe over Ukraine, with Wang telling Blinken that Russia's security concerns "should be taken seriously". —AFP

Guns among LA train loot

LOS ANGELES: Dozens of guns have been stolen from freight trains that have been looted in Los Angeles, the city's police chief has said. Images of the detritus left behind by thieves who break into stationary wagons in the middle of the second biggest city in the United States swept around the world this month. Now the city's top policeman has said that the bandits got away with more than just Amazon packages. "People were... breaking into these containers and stealing firearms, tens of firearms," Michael Moore told the Police Commission this week. "That gave us great concern as a source again of further violence in the city." An AFP team filmed thousands of gutted boxes on the stretch of tracks near the city center, many from major retailers like Target, and being shipped by carriers including UPS and FedEx. The thieves wait until the long freight trains stop on the tracks and break the locks with bolt cutters. —AFP

Governor becomes teacher

NEW MEXICO: The governor of New Mexico started work Wednesday as a substitute teacher, replacing one of the thousands of educators across the United States who have been forced off work by the COVID-19 pandemic. Michelle Lujan Grisham—a lawyer by training—swapped the governor's mansion for the classroom as part of the "Supporting Teachers and Families" initiative designed to plug holes in staffing in schools and child care across the state. "It was maybe one of the best days in my entire career," Grisham said after the final school bell had rung. "It was easier than managing the cabinet," she quipped, but "it was more complicated than I was expecting." Last week, Grisham issued a plea for state workers and National Guard troops to sign up as licensed substitute teachers and child care workers. "Our schools are a critical source of stability for our children, we know they learn best in the classroom and thrive by being among their peers," the governor said in a statement announcing the program. —AFP



TEGUCIGALPA: Honduran president-elect Xiomara Castro (left) and Argentina's Vice President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner pose during a meeting in Tegucigalpa. —AFP

Honduras' 'first' woman leader

TEGUCIGALPA: Honduras president-elect Xiomara Castro was sworn in as the country's first woman president yesterday, as confusion reigns over who will be head of congress during her four-year term. Two rival factions in Castro's left-wing Libre party have voted in their own president of congress and negotiations to reach a solution stalled overnight on Wednesday. Luis Redondo, who has the support of Castro and much of her party, has been invited to preside over her inauguration. However, rebel deputy Jorge Calix, bolstered by the right-wing opposition National and Liberal parties, has the support of more than 70 of the 128-member congress, including close to 20 Libre deputies. Castro made a last-ditch attempt to resolve the dispute on Wednesday night by offering Calix the job of Cabinet Coordinator — a similar role to chief of staff — in her government, in a bid to convince him to drop his claim to the congress president role. —AFP

JOHANNESBURG: A soccer star shot dead. Parliament gutted by fire. People trampled to death in riots. Even with the most spectacular crimes, South Africa's criminal justice system can't seem to keep up. For months, the nation has engaged in a lengthy bout of public soul-searching over its failure to hold wrongdoers to account. Already weary from its globally high crime rate, South Africans watched their parliament burn on January 2 — as anti-apartheid icon Desmond Tutu was interred at a cathedral a few blocks away. A man was quickly arrested, after he simply walked through security, undetected by video surveillance for hours.

But questions immediately arose about whether he acted on his own, and how such a dramatic lapse in security could happen in the first place. At the highest levels, the justice system operates with a fierce independence and a strong check on executive power. The Constitutional Court ordered former president Jacob Zuma to prison in July for refusing to testify to anti-corruption investigators — and he went. But the ensuing riots instigated by his supporters cast a harsh light on the weaknesses of the criminal justice system on the streets.

Police intelligence failed to predict or stem the riots, which left more than 300 dead. Some were trampled to death at neighborhood grocery stores when the riots descended into widespread looting. Since then, the police's priority crimes unit says only eight people have appeared in court over the worst unrest of the democratic era. "People think they can get away with it," a police source said. "They think the police is unable to investigate their cases and bring them to justice."

Hong Kongers move to Taiwan in record numbers

TAIPEI: The number of Hong Kongers settling in Taiwan hit a new record last year, official figures from the self-ruled island show, as China ramps up control of the financial hub. Democratic Taiwan has long attracted Hong Kong people seeking an alternative to their city's frenetic pace and sky-high rents. But the flow has accelerated since Beijing imposed a sweeping national security law on Hong Kong to smother dissent following massive and often violent pro-democracy protests in 2019.

The number of Hong Kongers securing the right to stay on the island reached almost 13,000 last year, according to Taiwan's National Immigration Agency. Some 11,173 of those acquired short-term residency while another 1,685 received perma-

nent residency. That followed a doubling of the number in 2020 compared to the year before, with 10,813 people granted short-term residency visas. The previous record was 7,506 in 2014 during Hong Kong's pro-democracy "umbrella movement" protests.

Taiwan does not have an asylum or refugee law, nor does it accept refugee applications—fearful of a potential influx from the authoritarian Chinese mainland. Hong Kongers can, however, apply to live on the island through other channels, including investment visas. The government of President Tsai Ing-wen has expressed support for Hong Kong's democracy movement and launched an office in 2020 to deal with fleeing Hong Kongers seeking to stay.

Several high-profile Hong Kong dissidents including bookseller Lam Wing-kee and visual artist Kacey Wong have sought sanctuary in Taiwan in recent years. But the island, which lives under constant threat of an invasion by China, has also rejected some immigration applications

US hospital refuses heart transplant to unvaccinated man

BOSTON: A hospital in Boston refused to perform a heart transplant on a patient who had not been vaccinated for COVID-19, US television media reported Wednesday. A spokeswoman for Brigham and Women's Hospital confirmed in a statement to AFP that vaccination against the coronavirus is "required" for organ transplant recipients there. The patient's father, David Ferguson, appeared on news channels CNN and ABC to share the family's story, saying his 31-year-old son has been to the "edge of

death" and "pushed to the limit" waiting for a heart transplant. The patient, who had been in line for the transplant at the Boston hospital, has refused to receive a COVID vaccine. "It's kind of against his basic principles, he doesn't believe in it," Ferguson told ABC. "It's a policy they are enforcing and so because he won't get the shot, they took him off the list of a heart transplant," his father said. The hospital "requires several CDC-recommended vaccines, including the COVID-19 vaccine," Brigham and Women's said the statement.

The hospital also requires "lifestyle behaviors for transplant candidates to create both the best chance for a successful operation and to optimize the patient's survival after transplantation, given that their immune system is drastically suppressed," the statement read. Arthur Caplan, a medical ethicist at New York University, told CBS: "Post any transplant your immune system is cut off. COVID could kill you." "The organs are scarce and they are not going to distribute them to someone who has a poor chance of living when others who are vaccinated have a better chance post-surgery of surviving," Caplan said.

That is why "patients are not active on the waitlist without" the vaccine, said the hospital, where Ferguson's son is still being treated. The father said he respected his son's choice and planned to get him transferred to another hospital. "But we are running out of time," Ferguson said of his son's condition. The United States, where only 62 percent of the total population is fully vaccinated — due partly to deep political divisions over the shots — has counted nearly 60 million COVID infections and 872,000 deaths. —AFP

Mafia-style killings

After nearly two decades of sustained decreases in violent crimes, the number of murders rose 37 percent from 2012 to 2020, he said. During that period, the budget for policing rose by 65 percent. Much of that additional spending simply covered pay rises for police. The number of actual police personnel fell by six percent. Police reservists, who could be called in for events like the riots,

plunged by 77 percent, Newham said.

Zuma also systematically appointed loyalists to head the police, public prosecution and intelligence agencies. A report released this month into corruption by Zuma, the product of three years of investigations, detailed how those appointments and other moves undermined the entire criminal justice system. The extent of corruption was so vast that South Africans call it "state capture" — to describe how the bribery and corruption dominated government operations.

"Between 2009 and 2018, if you were in an organized criminal group that was involved in state capture, there was a feeling that you would get away with it," said Guy Lamb, a political scientist at the University of Stellenbosch. That period included jaw-dropping cases like the murder of Senzo Meyiwa, the captain of the national football team who was gunned down at his girlfriend's home in 2014. At the time, police said it was a robbery gone wrong. Authorities now say it was a contract killing.

The alleged hitman was convicted Tuesday for other murders dating to 2015. He's still awaiting trial for Meyiwa's death. Delays in prosecuting organized crime, whether high-level corruption or mafia-style killings, stem from understaffing of law enforcement across the board, Lamb said. Prosecutors are negotiating for increased staff and budgets, but government coffers are thin after years of economic troubles dating to even before the pandemic. "The point is, going forward, it's about the police needing to work with communities to find ways to prevent crime and violence," he said. —AFP



Intelligence fail to predict or stem riots

Zuma became president," said ISS expert Gareth Newham.



TAIPEI: Local residents take photos in front of tiger statues, that marks the upcoming Lunar New Year of the tiger, in front of a department store in Taipei yesterday. —AFP

over national security concerns. Last year the government refused to grant residency to Hong Kong entertain-

ment tycoon Charles Heung whose family have close ties with Chinese authorities. —AFP

Greece, Turkey reel from political fallout of snowstorm

ISTANBUL: Turkey's main airport stirred back to life on Wednesday and Greece's under-fire prime minister issued a formal apology as the east Mediterranean neighbors faced the political fallout of a paralyzing blizzard. Public anger has been boiling over in both countries over officials' seeming helplessness in the face of one of the heaviest snowstorms in years. Stranded passengers at Istanbul's international airport — Europe's busiest — chanted "we need a hotel" on the second day of a shutdown Tuesday that grounded flights spanning much of the world.

The Greek government woke up on Wednesday to newspaper headlines lamenting a "fiasco" and "mistakes that brought chaos" to the snowy streets of the capital Athens. "A government buried in snow," Greece's leftist Efsyn daily said. The problems at the Istanbul airport are a sensitive political issue for President Recep Erdogan ahead of an election due by mid-2023. Erdogan called the gleaming glass-and-steel structure the "pride of our country and example to the world" after making it one of the "mega-projects" of his two-decade rule.

But Erdogan's critics had long questioned his decision to place the airport on a remote patch by the Black Sea that is exposed to fog and strong winds. Turkish opposition newspapers pointed out that two top ministers had to land at the old Ataturk Airport on their arrival from Ankara on Tuesday. The airport handled just a few flights on Tuesday. Images on social media showed Turkish anti-riot police arriving in large numbers to deal with reports of rising public anger and protests.

The airport said on Wednesday that "operations which were temporarily suspended due to adverse



ISTANBUL: A picture taken in the Eminonu district of Istanbul after a snowstorm shows pigeons waiting to be fed. Istanbul is experiencing heavy snowfalls, with roads blocked, flights and intercity transportation canceled and thousands of vehicles stranded on major roads. —AFP

weather conditions have returned to normal". It said 681 flights were planned for the day. Istanbul's opposition Mayor Ekrem Imamoglu — seen by analysts as one of several leading politicians coveting Erdogan's job — also apologized "to our citizens, who became victims" of the disruption. But he said Erdogan had picked a "risky" location for the airport because of weather. Radiant sunshine in Istanbul on Wednesday was helping efforts to clear the streets of up to 85 centimeters of snow. The city's food delivery apps also resumed partial service after being down for two days.

The chaos and anger in Greece mostly revolved around the ring road around the capital Athens. The government was forced to call in the army to help dig out thousands of stranded drivers. Many abandoned their cars in snowdrifts and walked home on foot. Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis offered his "personal and sincere apology" on Wednesday to those stranded in the snow. He said "lessons" would be drawn and pledged 2,000 euros (\$2,300) to stranded motorists and 1,000 euros to train passengers stuck at a station north of Athens. —AFP