

## International

# Philippines to re-open to vaccinated foreign tourists

## Tourism sector devastated by plunge in international visitors, curbs on travel

**MANILA:** The Philippines will re-open to fully vaccinated tourists from most countries on February 10 and lift quarantine requirements, officials said Friday, nearly two years after closing its borders to contain the coronavirus. Tourism operators across the archipelago nation famed for its beaches and dive spots have been devastated by a plunge in international visitors and restrictions on domestic travel.

Their misery was worsened by a super typhoon that smashed into the country in December, wiping out resorts, restaurants and bars in popular tourist destinations. "The tourism industry can now recover and it can contribute big to jobs, livelihoods and the country's economic growth," presidential spokesman Karlo Nograles told a briefing.

A previous plan to welcome back tourists from December 1 was suspended after the emergence of the hyper-contagious Omicron variant that has since ripped through the Philippines. Friday's announcement allows for the resumption of visa-free travel for short visits by nationals from the 157 countries who already enjoyed permit-free entry to the Philippines before the pandemic began.

Fully vaccinated tourists from countries on the list will need to test negative for COVID-19 shortly before flying to the Philippines and will

not have to quarantine on arrival. The list excludes China, the Philippines' fastest-growing tourist market, as well as Taiwan and India. But it includes Manila's remaining top-10 tourism sources, such as the United States, South Korea, Japan, Australia, Canada, and Britain.

Health Undersecretary Rosario Vergeire said it made no sense to restrict international travellers when COVID-19 transmission rates in the Philippines were so high, "maybe even higher" than in some countries. "Based on those premises we recommended to ease restrictions," she said.

Unvaccinated foreigners will be banned from entry from February 16, Nograles said. Tourism is a major driver of the Southeast Asian country's economy, accounting for nearly 13 percent of gross domestic product in 2019, when more than eight million people visited, official data shows. That slumped to 5.4 percent in 2020 as tourist arrivals plummeted 82 percent to 1.48 million.

The government tightened restrictions across the national capital region and other provinces in recent weeks as Omicron fuelled a record surge in infections. Around half of the country's 110 million people are fully vaccinated. The Philippines has recorded more than 3.4 million infections since the start of the pandemic, including over 53,000 deaths. —AFP



**MANILA:** A customer walks past tiger statues for sale at a store in Chinatown district of Manila on Friday ahead of the Lunar New Year, which welcomes the Year of the Tiger on February 1. —AFP

## 'Living in a dark era': One year since Myanmar's coup

**YANGON:** Hours before Myanmar's new parliament was due to convene last February, troops rounded up lawmakers in dawn raids, ending a brief democratic interlude and setting the stage for months of bloodshed. A year later the country's latest junta is struggling to contain the backlash unleashed by its power grab, with daily clashes and swathes of the country outside of its control.

Almost 1,500 civilians have been killed and over 11,000 arrested in its ongoing crackdown, according to a local monitor, with rights groups accusing junta troops of torture and extrajudicial killings.

But for a pro-democracy movement angered by the military's power-grab, ending its decades-long entanglement in Myanmar politics once and for all is the only option. That means, analysts say, there is no end in sight to the crisis that has devastated the economy, emptied schools and hospitals across the country and sent thousands fleeing to neighboring Thailand and India.

"We are still living in a dark era," said Htoo Aung-using a pseudonym for fear of reprisal-at a

market in commercial hub Yangon. "We have to think how we can struggle on through our daily lives under this military dictatorship rather than about our goals, our dreams in the future."

In Yangon and other cities, the junta is projecting a return to normality as traffic jams return and shopping malls slowly fill up again. But, days before the February 1 anniversary, it is taking no chances.

Authorities recently announced that those honking car horns or banging pots and pans-popular protests in cities following the coup-could be charged with treason or under an anti-terror law.

But daily clashes between the dozens of "people's defense forces" (PDFs) that have sprung up across the country to fight back against the putsch show no sign of abating. The ex-protesters and villagers that fill their ranks have dealt some painful blows to junta troops with guerilla ambushes and mine attacks, even as they struggle to secure heavy weapons.

A shadow group of lawmakers claims almost 3,000 junta troops died in fighting with PDFs between June and November-the junta says 168 soldiers and police were killed between February and late October.

### Air strikes

The year of conflict has taken a toll on the military, which is facing morale and recruitment problems, said International Crisis Group's Myanmar senior advisor Richard Horsey.

Friday. The incident, the latest to spotlight sexual violence in India, drew widespread condemnation including from the Delhi Commission for Women and Delhi's chief minister, who called it "shameful".

Footage on social media, which could not be independently verified, showed the victim-her face blackened with ink and her hair chopped off-being pushed and heckled by several women as onlookers cheered and filmed with their phones.

R Sathiyasundaram, deputy commissioner of police, said the incident in the Shahdara district of east Delhi on Wednesday was a result of "previous enmity" among neighbors. He gave no further details but media reports said a 16-year-old relative of the perpetrators

Quan, a follower who travelled from Hanoi with his wife and son. Nam Anh, 22, said the monk was a national treasure.

"I am really very proud that Vietnam has such an outstanding figure who had great influence across the world." Widely known as the father of mindfulness, Thich Nhat Hanh wrote more than 100 books on the practice and hosted retreats worldwide.

Born in 1926, Thich Nhat Hanh was ordained aged 16 and went on to found a youth school which trained volunteers to build clinics and infrastructure in villages blighted by war.

### Man of peace

In the early 1960s he travelled to the United States, where he taught at Columbia and Princeton universities, but after one trip in 1966 to meet US civil rights icon Martin Luther King-who joined his calls to end the Vietnam War-he was barred from returning home. A year later King nominated Thich Nhat Hanh for the Nobel Peace Prize, telling the committee in a letter: "this gentle Buddhist monk from Vietnam is a scholar of immense intellectual capacity". Vietnamese authorities permitted him to return to the communist country in 2018, but plain-

security law on the city. The University of Hong Kong (HKU) last month removed a famous statue commemorating pro-democracy protesters killed by Chinese troops around Tiananmen Square. At least two other local universities removed artworks in public areas marking the crackdown that same week. Yesterday, a large slogan painted on an HKU campus bridge mourning the Tiananmen "martyrs" that had escaped the earlier censorship was blocked with metal sheets.

An AFP reporter saw construction workers covering the calligraphy, which read: "The heroic spirit of martyrs slaughtered in cold blood will live forever, the fire of democracy that overcomes evil will never be put out". Created by HKU students shortly after the crackdown, it had adorned the campus for more than three decades according to local media. The calligraphy birthed a cam-



**YANGON, Myanmar:** In this file photo taken on November 13, 2010, Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi (front right) and senior National League for Democracy (NLD) staff walk towards the gate of her house to meet with supporters after her release from house arrest in Yangon, after being detained for two decades. —AFP

"But these challenges are very unlikely to force the military to capitulate or lose its grip on state power," Horsey said. Junta troops were blamed for a Christmas Eve massacre that left the charred remains of more than 30 people on a highway in the east of the country, including two staff members of the Save the Children charity. —AFP

had killed himself by jumping in front of a train after the married 21-year-old woman rejected his advances.

"All 11 arrested including two minors, who can't be tried as adults, belong to a single family and the videos clearly show that the women were at the forefront," Sathiyasundaram told AFP. The victim told police that she was abducted by members of the family before being raped by several men and minors-egged on by the women-and then beaten with sticks and paraded outside.

"We are examining the videos to identify others who were involved and there will be more arrests," Chinmay Biswal, additional commissioner of Delhi police, told AFP. —AFP



**HUE, Vietnam:** A Buddhist follower holds a portrait of Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh at young age during his procession to a cremation ground at Tu Hieu pagoda in Hue province yesterday. —AFP

clothes police kept watch outside his pagoda compound, closely monitoring his activities. "I don't understand why even now, the Vietnamese state did not send top leaders to pay tribute to this great man," said a follower who identified himself only as Nam from Ho Chi Minh. —AFP

pus ritual with students leaders annually repainting the words in white to symbolize mourning.

HKU did not immediately respond to AFP's questions on whether the words will be permanently erased.

But a spokesperson told reporters that the university "regularly conducts maintenance works at various locations and facilities, with the above site being one such project". Hong Kong's universities, ranked among the best in Asia, had long been free of the political censorship that pervades mainland campuses.

But Beijing has begun remoulding Hong Kong in its own image following huge and often violent democracy protests in 2019. The national security law has effectively criminalized dissent including commemorating Tiananmen with authorities stressing the need for schools to foster "patriotism". —AFP

### News in brief

#### US sends 7.4m doses to Dhaka

**WASHINGTON:** The United States began shipping another 7.4 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines to Bangladesh on Friday, a US official told AFP. "Thanks to the US commitment to playing a leading role in ending the pandemic everywhere, the United States is shipping 7,434,180 doses of Pfizer vaccine to Bangladesh," a White House official said, asking not to be identified. The latest shipment-made through Covax, the global distribution initiative co-led by public-private partnership Gavi-came as totals of US donations rose above 400 million worldwide. —AFP

#### Honduras crisis heads to court

**TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras:** The crisis in Honduras's Congress-where rival factions of new President Xiomara Castro's left-wing Libre party have elected separate leaders-headed to the country's Supreme Court on Friday, with both sides asking justices to settle the dispute. Castro ally Luis Redondo, who belongs to Libre's coalition partner Savior Party of Honduras (PSH), and Jorge Calix, who represents Libre's rebel faction and has opposition backing, each claim to be the rightful leader of Congress. —AFP

#### Laos makes huge meth seizure

**BANGKOK, Thailand:** Laos police have made their second-biggest single seizure of illegal drugs, uncovering 36 million methamphetamine pills, a United Nations official said yesterday. The raid in the northern province of Bokeo came three months after officers netted Asia's biggest ever haul in the same area with 55 million meth pills found in a beer truck. Laos is part of the Golden Triangle covering the border areas with Myanmar and Thailand that has for decades been a hub for Southeast Asia's lucrative drug trade. —AFP

#### 11 arrested after Papua fight

**SORONG, Indonesia:** Eleven people have been arrested after a deadly clash at a nightclub in Indonesia's easternmost region, police said yesterday. The fight erupted on Tuesday in Sorong, a relatively quiet city in West Papua province, and 18 people were killed, most of them in a blaze at the Double O nightclub. Indonesia's National Police had earlier said the death toll was 19, but later corrected the number "following a development in the field". "We have arrested 11 people," West Papua Police chief Tornagogo Sihombing said at a press conference, adding two of them were believed to have been involved in the stabbing of a victim. —AFP

#### DR Congo court set for verdict

**KANANGA:** A military court in Democratic Republic of Congo yesterday is set to pronounce a long-awaited verdict in a mass trial over the 2017 murder of two UN experts in a troubled central region. Dozens of people have been on trial for more than four years over a killing that shook diplomats and the aid community, although key questions about the episode remain unanswered. Michael Sharp, an American, and Zaida Catalan, a Swedish-Chilean, disappeared as they probed violence in the Kasai region after being hired to do so by the United Nations. —AFP

## 11 arrested after Delhi woman 'gang-raped, paraded in streets'

**NEW DELHI:** Eleven people including several women have been arrested after a young mother was allegedly abducted, gang-raped and then paraded through the lanes of Delhi in broad daylight, Indian police said

## Vietnamese bid farewell to father of mindfulness

**HANOI:** Tens of thousands of Vietnamese yesterday bade farewell to the late monk and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh-one of the world's most influential religious leaders-ahead of his cremation ceremony in the country's Buddhist heartland. The Zen master, who was credited with bringing mindfulness to the West and whose reach in Buddhism was seen as second only to the Dalai Lama, died aged 95 a week ago at the Tu Hieu Pagoda in the central city of Hue.

His remains were brought to an open cremation site on Saturday morning, followed by a crowd of tens of thousands including Buddhist monks in yellow and brown robes and followers dressed in grey.

The procession chanted Buddhist prayers. "We must bid farewell to our master. He plays an important role in my family's life, helping us through our most difficult moments," said Do

## HK university covers up Tiananmen crackdown tribute

**HONG KONG:** Hong Kong's oldest university covered up one of the last public tributes to the deadly 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown yesterday, as Beijing continues to muzzle dissent in the financial hub. Hong Kong was the only place in China where mass remembrance of Tiananmen was tolerated, but authorities have driven such activities underground after imposing a sweeping national