

International

Sri Lanka president's office to reopen after crackdown

Crackdown on demonstrators triggers international condemnation

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka's besieged presidential office will reopen on Monday, police said, days after anti-government demonstrators were flushed out in a military crackdown that triggered international condemnation. Widespread public anger over the island's unprecedented economic crisis saw protesters storm and occupy the colonial-era building earlier this month.

Soldiers were forced to rescue then-president Gotabaya Rajapaksa from his nearby residence on the same day, with the leader fleeing to Singapore and resigning days later.

Troops armed with batons and automatic weapons cleared the 92-year-old presidential secretariat in a pre-dawn raid Friday on the orders of Rajapaksa's successor, Ranil Wickremesinghe.

At least 48 people were wounded and nine arrested in the operation, during which security forces tore down tents set up by protesters outside the complex since April.

"The office is ready for reopening from Monday," said a police official Sunday, who declined to be named as he was not authorized to speak to the media. "The siege of the secretariat, which lasted since May 9, has now been lifted."

Police said forensic experts had been called in to check damage to the Presidential Secretariat and gather evidence. Western governments, the UN and human rights groups have condemned Wickremesinghe for using violence against unarmed protesters who had announced

their intention to vacate the site later on Friday.

Wickremesinghe defended the crackdown and said he had told Colombo-based diplomats on Friday that blocking government buildings was unacceptable. Police spokesman Nihal Taldewa said protesters were free to continue their demonstrations at a designated site near the presidential office.

"They can remain at the official protest site. The government may even open a few more places for demonstrators in the city," Taldewa said Sunday. The military operation to clear the secretariat building and its immediate surroundings came less than 24 hours after Wickremesinghe was sworn in and just before a new cabinet was appointed.

Burning fuel crisis
Sri Lanka's 22 million people have also endured months of lengthy blackouts, record inflation and shortages of food, fuel and petrol. Its government is officially bankrupt, having defaulted on its \$51 billion foreign debt, and is currently in bailout talks with the International Monetary Fund.

The economic crisis which fuelled the protest campaign shows no sign of easing, but the government announced Sunday it would reopen schools which had remained shut for the better part of a month.

The education ministry said students and teachers will be asked to return to school only for three days each week as transport is still hampered by a national fuel shortage. Miles-long queues of motorists waiting to fill up were



COLOMBO: People walk past army personnel standing guard in front of the Presidential Secretariat in Colombo on July 23, 2022. —AFP

seen across the country Sunday despite the government introducing a rationing system.

New president Wickremesinghe has said he will

unveil a fresh budget for the rest of the year in August as previous revenue and expenditure estimates were unrealistic. —AFP



Troops lift siege of secretariat

China launches second of 3 space station modules

BEIJING: China on Sunday launched the second of three modules needed to complete its new space station, state media reported, the latest step in Beijing's ambitious space program.

The uncrewed craft, named Wentian, was propelled by a Long March 5B rocket at 2:22 pm (0622 GMT) from the Wenchang launch centre on China's tropical island of Hainan. A quarter of an hour later, an official from the China Manned Space Agency (CMSA) confirmed the "success" of the launch.

Hundreds of people gathered on nearby beaches to take photos of the launcher rising through the air in a plume of white smoke.

After around eight minutes of flight, "the Wentian lab module successfully separated from the rocket and entered its intended orbit, making the launch a complete success," the CMSA said.

Beijing launched the central module of its space station Tiangong—which means "heavenly palace"—in April 2021. Almost 18 meters (60 feet) long and weighing 22 tons (48,500 pounds), the new module has three sleeping areas and space for scientific experiments.

It will dock with the existing module in space, a challenging operation that experts said will require several high-

precision manipulations and the use of a robotic arm. "This is the first time China has docked such large vehicles together, which is a delicate operation," said Jonathan McDowell, an astronomer at the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics.

He said until the next module arrives, the space station will have a "rather unusual L-shape" which will take a lot of power to keep stable. "These are all technical challenges that the USSR pioneered with the Mir station in the late 1980s, but it's new to China," he told AFP.

"But it will result in a much more capable station with the space and power to carry out more scientific experiments." Wentian will also serve as a backup platform to control the space station in the event of a failure.

The third and final module is scheduled to dock in October, and Tiangong—which should have a lifespan of at least 10 years—is expected to become fully operational by the end of the year.

Fast-paced space plan

Under Chinese President Xi Jinping, the country's plans for its heavily promoted "space dream" have been put into overdrive. China has made large



WENCHANG, China: The rocket carrying China's second module for its Tiangong space station lifts off from Wenchang spaceport in southern China on July 24, 2022. —AFP

strides in catching up with the United States and Russia, where astronauts and cosmonauts have decades of experience in space exploration.

"The CSS (Chinese Space Station) will complete its construction... in one and half a year which will be the fastest in history for any modular space station," said Chen Lan, analyst for the site Go-Taikonauts.com, which specializes in China's space program. "In comparison, the constructions of Mir and the International Space Station took 10 and 12 years respectively."

China's space program has already landed a rover on Mars and sent probes to the Moon.

In addition to a space station, Beijing is also planning to build a base on the Moon and send humans there by 2030. China has been excluded from the International Space Station since 2011, when the United States banned NASA from engaging with the country.

While China does not plan to use its space station for global cooperation on the scale of the ISS, Beijing has said it is open to foreign collaboration. —AFP

Over 1,000 migrants arrive in Italy in hours: NGO

ROME: More than a thousand migrants arrived in Italy within a few hours while hundreds of others, rescued by humanitarian vessels, were waiting for a port to receive them, NGOs and authorities said Sunday. Between January 1 and July 22, 34,000 people arrived in Italy by sea compared with 25,500 during the same period in 2021 and 10,900 in 2020, Italy's interior ministry said.

More than 600 people attempting to cross the Mediterranean on board a drifting fishing vessel were rescued on Saturday by a merchant vessel and coastguards off Calabria, at the southern tip of Italy. They were landed in several ports in Sicily.

The authorities also recovered five bodies of migrants who had died in so far undetermined circumstances. On the island of Lampedusa, some 522 people from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia, among others, arrived from the late hours of Saturday in 15 different boats from Tunisia and Libya. According to the Italian media, the island's reception centre has been overwhelmed.

With a capacity of 250-300 people, it currently hosts 1,200, according to the Ansa news agency. Offshore NGOs continued to recover hundreds of migrants in distress in the Mediterranean. SeaWatch reported that it had carried out four rescue operations on Saturday.

"On board SeaWatch3, we have 428 people, including women and children, a woman nine months pregnant and a patient with severe burns," it said on its Twitter account.

OceanViking, operated by non-governmental organization SOS Mediterranean, reported that it had recovered 87 people, including 57 unaccompanied minors, who were crammed onto "an overcrowded inflatable boat in distress in international waters off Libya". The Central Mediterranean migration route is the most dangerous in the world. The International Organization for Migration estimates that 990 people have died and disappeared since the beginning of the year. —AFP

California wildfire rages as US bakes in record heat wave

SAN FRANCISCO: A California wildfire ripped through thousands of acres Saturday after being sparked a day earlier, as millions of Americans sweltered through scorching heat with already record-setting temperatures due to climb. The heat wave encompassing multiple regions has increased the risk of blazes, such as the major Oak Fire, which broke out Friday in California near Yosemite National Park, where giant sequoias have already been threatened by flames in recent days.

The fire—described as "explosive" by officials—grew from about 600 acres to around 11,900 acres (4,800 hectares) within 24 hours. Concentrated in Mariposa County, it has already destroyed ten properties and damaged five others, with thousands more threatened.

More than 6,000 people had been evacuated, said Hector Vasquez, a California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection official, as the fire remained uncontained as of Saturday evening. The department said the fire's activity was "extreme." California Governor Gavin Newsom on Saturday declared a "state of emergency" in Mariposa County, citing "conditions of extreme peril to the safety of persons and property."

The blaze left ashes, gutted vehicles and twisted remains of properties in its wake, as emergency personnel worked to evacuate residents and protect structures in its path. More than 500 firefighters are working to extinguish the flames and are being assisted by aircraft, Vasquez said. Officials cited by the Los Angeles Times said it could take a week to contain.

Al-Shabaab fighters 'destroyed' in Ethiopian incursion

ADDIS ABABA: Authorities in the Ethiopian region of Somali on Saturday said they had "destroyed" fighters from the Al-Shabaab Islamist



NEW YORK: People hold their hands over their hearts during a moment of silence as the climate clock counts down seven to six at a demonstration for "Climate Emergency Day" at Union Square in New York. —AFP

"There's personnel showing up from various departments all over the state to help control this fire," Vasquez told AFP, saying the situation remained "really challenging." Climate scientist Daniel Swain tweeted that the fire was "exhibiting consistently extreme behavior," while stunned social media users posted images of billowing plumes of smoke that reached thousands of feet into the air. In recent years, California and other parts of the western United States have been ravaged by huge and fast-moving wildfires, driven by years of drought and a warming climate. Drought and high temperatures have been

group, in a rare militant incursion from neighboring Somalia.

Somali's state communication bureau in a statement said an armed Al-Shabaab group that crossed into the southeastern region on Tuesday "was surrounded in a sub-locality called Hulhul and completely destroyed". A three-day operation left more than 100 members of the militant group dead and destroyed 13 vehicles, it added.

The authorities said the armed group was seeking to pass through El-Kere district in the Somali

"not in our favor," Vasquez said.

Evidence of global warming could be seen elsewhere in the country, as more than a dozen states were under a heat advisory. The central and northeast US regions face the brunt of the extreme temperatures, which are not expected to peak until Sunday at the earliest and have sent public health officials scrambling.

"From the southern Plains into the East, it will feel extremely oppressive," the National Weather Service (NWS) said Saturday evening, warning as well of possible severe storms. —AFP

region, more than 100 kilometers (62 miles) from the Somalia-Ethiopia border.

On Thursday, officials and residents of Bakool region, on the border with neighboring Somalia, reported Al-Shabaab attacks the previous day against bases hosting a special Ethiopian police unit which helps protect the frontier. Mohamed Malim, a local official in Somalia's Hudur district, told AFP on Thursday that "this was the heaviest fighting ever" around the towns of Ato and Yeed in the country's west. —AFP

North Korea accuses US of biological warfare in Ukraine

PYONGYANG: North Korea accused the United States on Sunday of manufacturing biological weapons in Ukraine, echoing a Russian claim dismissed by the United Nations in March. Moscow ally Pyongyang in February said US policy was the "root cause of the Ukraine crisis", and this month formally recognized two self-proclaimed pro-Russian separatist regions in eastern Ukraine, prompting Kyiv to cut diplomatic ties with North Korea.

Washington "set up many biological labs in tens of countries and regions, including Ukraine, in disregard of the international treaties", the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) said Sunday, citing what it said had been "detected" by Russia. Moscow in March accused Washington of funding research into the development of biological weapons in Ukraine, which has invaded by Russia nearly five months ago. Washington and Kyiv denied the existence of laboratories intended to produce biological weapons in Ukraine, with the United States saying the allegations were a sign that Moscow may use such tactics itself. —AFP