

## International

# First Russian passports handed out to Ukrainians in the south

## Zelensky warns of food crisis, urges end to Russian blockade

**MOSCOW:** Authorities in the Moscow-occupied city of Kherson in southern Ukraine handed out Russian passports to local residents for the first time on Saturday, news agencies reported. Russia's TASS agency said 23 Kherson residents received a Russian passport at a ceremony through a "simplified procedure" facilitated by a decree signed by Russian President Vladimir Putin in May.

"All our Kherson residents want to obtain a passport and (Russian) citizenship as soon as possible," the regional administration's pro-Moscow chief Vladimir Saldo was quoted as saying by TASS. "It's a new era that is beginning for us... It's the most important document a person can possess in their life," Saldo told the RIA Novosti agency. The Kherson authorities said the timing of the passport distribution was chosen with Russia Day in mind.

It falls on Sunday and is a public holiday to mark Russia's independence from the former Soviet Union. It is an occasion for many Russians to display national pride. The Russian army conquered most of the Kherson region at the start of its February 24 offensive. The Kremlin decree authorizing the local authorities to grant Russian passports to local residents also concerned the nearby Zaporizhzhia region partly controlled by Moscow's forces. Ukraine denounced the move as a "flagrant violation" of its territorial integrity, saying Putin's decree was "legally void".

### End blockade

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on

Saturday urged international pressure to end a Russian naval blockade of Black Sea ports that has choked off his country's grain exports, threatening a global food crisis. Before the Russian invasion, Ukraine was the world's top producer of sunflower oil and a major wheat exporter, but millions of tons of grain exports remain trapped due to the blockade. The United Nations and some countries are pushing for a maritime corridor to be opened up to allow exports to resume.

"The world will face an acute and severe food crisis and famine, in many countries of Asia and Africa," Zelensky said in a video address to the Shangri-La Dialogue security summit in Singapore. "The shortage of foodstuffs will inexorably lead to political chaos, which can result in the (collapse) of many governments and the ousting of many politicians," he told delegates, including Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin and China's defense minister.

"This looming threat is plain to see by just looking at the skyrocketing prices of basic products in the world markets and in certain countries. This is the direct consequence of the acts of the Russian state," Zelensky urged the international community to "restore the full might of the international law" that existed before the February 24 invasion. Kyiv is in discussion with the UN, Turkey and other countries to open a way to allow the grain exports, and Zelensky said the talks are focused on the "format" of the corridor.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and his Turkish counterpart held talks this week in Ankara on securing safe passage for Ukrainian grain



**LYSYCHANSK:** A house burns after being shelled during an artillery duel between Ukrainian and Russian troops in the city of Lysychansk, eastern Ukrainian region of Donbas, on June 11, 2022. —AFP

exports, but the discussions made little headway. Zelensky said Ukraine was currently exporting more than two million tons of grain a month via rail but this was not enough. He accused Russia of seeking to push up grain prices higher, adding it

had done the same with energy. Russia's invasion sparked worldwide condemnation and a barrage of sanctions. After being repelled from Kyiv and other parts of the country, it is focusing its offensive on the eastern Donbas region. —AFP

## Attack sparks outcry over violence against women in China

**BEIJING:** Nine people have been arrested for a vicious attack on a group of women at a restaurant in China, police said Saturday, in a case that has sparked outrage over predatory sexual behavior. Footage of the incident widely circulated online shows a man placing his hand on a woman's back as she shares a meal with two companions at a barbecue restaurant in northern China's Hebei province. After the woman pushes him away, the man strikes her before others drag her outside and deal a barrage of blows as she lies on the ground. Another woman is also knocked to the floor.

The video renewed an online debate about sexual harassment and gender-based violence in China where the conversation around women's rights has grown in recent years despite pressure from a patriarchal society, internet censorship and patchy legal support. Campaigners say domestic abuse remains pervasive and under-reported while

prominent feminists also face regular police harassment and detention. Web censors blocked keywords linked to the #MeToo movement after a wave of women accused university professors of sexual harassment in 2018.

Police in Tangshan city on Saturday said they had arrested nine people on suspicion of violent assault and "provoking trouble", adding that "the case is being further investigated". Two women treated at hospital following the incident were "in stable condition and not in mortal danger", while two others sustained minor injuries, authorities said Friday.

The attack generated hundreds of millions of comments on social media, where users slammed predatory behavior and urged authorities to crack down on violence against women. "All of this could happen to me, could happen to any of us," said one commenter in a post liked over 100,000 times. "How is this sort of thing still happening in 2022?" wrote another. "Please give them criminal sentences, and don't let any of them get away." Last year, a Chinese man was sentenced to death for murdering his ex-wife as she livestreamed on social media, in a case that shocked the nation. —AFP

## US blasts China for 'provocative' military activity

**SINGAPORE:** US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on Saturday blasted China's "provocative, destabilizing" military activity near Taiwan, as well as Beijing's growing aggression across the wider Asia-Pacific region. Tensions between Washington and Beijing are soaring over democratic, self-ruled Taiwan, which China views as its territory and has vowed to seize one day, by force if necessary. Beijing has conducted dozens of incursions into Taiwan's air defense zone this year, and on Friday, Defense Minister Wei Fenghe warned Austin that China was prepared to go to war if the island declares independence.

In an address to the Shangri-La Dialogue security summit in Singapore, Austin took aim at Beijing's "growing coercion" towards Taiwan, a day after holding his first face-to-face talks with Wei. "We've witnessed a steady increase in provocative and destabilizing military activity near Taiwan," he told the forum, which is attended by defense ministers from Asia and around the world. "That includes (Chinese military) aircraft flying near Taiwan in record numbers in recent months, and nearly on a daily basis," he said.

## Beijing delays school reopenings after new coronavirus outbreak

**BEIJING:** Most children in Beijing will not return to school next week as originally planned, Chinese officials said on Saturday, after an emerging COVID-19 outbreak prompted authorities to partly reverse a decision to resume in-person teaching. China is the last major economy still committed to a zero-COVID strategy, stamping out new cases with a combination of targeted lockdowns, mass testing and lengthy quarantines. But virus clusters in recent months have put that approach under strain. The megacity of Shanghai was forced into a gruelling months-long lockdown and in the capital Beijing, schools were shuttered and residents were ordered to work from home.

Authorities in Beijing eased many curbs earlier

this week, but dozens of infections linked to a bar have led authorities to tighten some restrictions again. Most primary and middle school students will "continue to study online at home" from Monday, city government spokesperson Xu Hejian said at a press briefing on Saturday.

The announcement partly walked back a previous decision to send younger pupils back to school in phases, starting next week. Some 115 cases have been linked to the bar cluster so far, municipal health official Liu Xiaofeng said at the briefing. The new outbreak was "at a rapidly developing stage ... and at a relatively high risk of spreading", Liu said. More than 20 million people in Shanghai began a mass testing drive on Saturday that local governments said would take place under temporary lockdown conditions.

The move comes less than two weeks after the eastern economic hub lurched out of a harsh lockdown that was punctuated by food shortages and isolated protests from irate residents. Officials have maintained a shifting patchwork of restrictions in Shanghai, wary of a virus resurgence after finally



**SHANGHAI:** People rest and eat take-away food at an open-air area of a shopping mall in Pudong district of Shanghai on June 11, 2022. —AFP

Taiwan militarily if it is attacked by China.

The White House has since insisted its policy of "strategic ambiguity" over whether or not it would intervene has not changed. In Saturday's address, the Pentagon chief reiterated US criticism of China's increasingly "coercive and aggressive approach to its territorial claims". China claims almost all of the resource-rich South China Sea, through which trillions of dollars in shipping trade passes annually, with competing claims from Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam.

Beijing has been accused of deploying a range of military hardware including anti-ship missiles and surface-to-air missiles there, and has ignored a 2016 international tribunal decision that declared its historical claim over most of the waters to be without basis. "Indo-Pacific countries shouldn't face political intimidation, economic coercion," said Austin, using an alternative name for the Asia-Pacific. He also criticized Russia's invasion of Ukraine, at the same time taking a veiled swipe at China's growing aggression.

"Russia's invasion of Ukraine is what happens when oppressors trample the rules that protect us all," he said. The United States and China have been at loggerheads over the invasion, with Washington accusing Beijing of providing tacit support for Moscow. China has called for talks to end the war, but has stopped short of condemning Russia's actions and has repeatedly criticized American arms donations to Ukraine. China's defense minister will address the summit on Sunday, its final day. —AFP



**BEIJING:** A health worker takes a swab sample from a boy to be tested for COVID-19 coronavirus at a nucleic acid testing station in Beijing on June 11, 2022. —AFP

containing the country's worst outbreak in two years. China recorded 138 domestic infections on Saturday, including 61 in Beijing and 16 in Shanghai, according to the National Health Commission. —AFP

## Iran convicts facing 'abhorrent' finger amputation

**PARIS:** Eight Iranian men convicted of theft are in imminent risk of having their fingers cut off, campaign groups warned on Friday, urging global action to halt the "inhuman" punishment. All eight men are being held in the Greater Tehran prison waiting for their fingers on one hand to be amputated, the Abdorrahman Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran (ABC) and Amnesty International said in separate statements. Three of them had been transferred from Orumiyyeh prison in northwestern Iran in May specifically for the amputation, they said.

According to Amnesty International, the authorities have informed the men that they will be transferred to another prison in the coming days for the sentence to be implemented with a guillotine machine. All eight were convicted of robbery and sentenced to amputation of their fingers, with the verdict upheld by the supreme court, Amnesty said. On June 8, all eight were summoned for transfer for the amputation which was postponed for unknown reasons.

In a joint statement with the Kurdistan Human Rights Network (KHRN), the ABC said it was concerned by "credible reports" that the device had now been installed in a clinic in Tehran's Evin prison and had already been used for at least one amputation in recent days. "Carrying out such a cruel and inhuman punishment violates the minimum standards of humanity and decency," said ABC executive director Roya Boroumand. "The international community can and should react urgently to stop the implementation of these amputations," she added. Finger amputations are permitted in the Islamic republic under sharia law, but have been rarely carried out in recent years. The ABC said it had collected reports on at least 356 sentences of amputation issued since the Islamic revolution in 1979, but added the real number is believed to be much higher. If the sentences are carried out, the men will have four fingers of their right hand cut off so only the palm of their hands and thumbs are left, according to Iran's penal code.

### 'Urgent intervention needed'

Diana Elkahawy, Amnesty International's deputy regional director for the Middle East and North Africa, said that the punishments represented an "abhorrent assault on human dignity." "We call on the international community to urgently intervene to stop these sentences from being carried out."

Amnesty cited reports by Iranian activists that a guillotine machine was brought to the medical clinic of Evin prison last month and on May 31, authorities amputated four fingers from a prisoner moved there from Kermanshah province in southwestern Iran. It said that punishments such as amputation amount to torture and are prohibited under international law noting that Iran's penal code allows other corporal punishments including flogging, blinding and stoning. Both Amnesty and ABC said one of the convicts, named as Hadi Rostami, had been flogged 60 times after protesting against his sentence and had attempted suicide twice in prison. The concern over the pending punishment comes as rights groups raise alarm over surging numbers of executions in Iran at a time of protests over price rises. According to Norway-based Iran Human Rights, at least 168 people were executed by Iranian authorities in the first five months of 2022, 50 percent more than in the same period last year. —AFP