



Journalists demand Assange be released from UK jail

'Life goes on' for unfazed Taiwanese on frontline islands



GAYAN, Afghanistan: Soldiers and Afghan Red Crescent Society officials stand near a helicopter at an earthquake hit area in Afghanistan's Gayan district, Paktika province. A powerful earthquake struck a remote border region of Afghanistan overnight killing over 1,000 people and injuring hundreds more, officials said. — AFP

Over 1,000 killed in Afghan quake

Government working within its capabilities as rescuers scramble for survivors

ZURMAT, Afghanistan: A powerful earthquake struck a remote border region of Afghanistan overnight killing at least 1,000 people and injuring hundreds more, officials said Wednesday, with the toll expected to rise as desperate rescuers dig through collapsed dwellings. The 5.9 magnitude quake struck hardest in the rugged east, where people already lead hard-scrabble lives in a country in the grip of a humanitarian disaster made worse by the Taliban takeover in August.

"People are digging grave after grave," said Mohammad Amin Huzaifa, head of the Information and Culture Department in hard-hit Paktika, adding that at least 1,000 people had died in that province alone. "It is raining also, and all houses are destroyed. People are still trapped under the rubble," he told journalists.

The death toll climbed steadily all day as news of casualties filtered in from hard-to-reach areas in the mountains, and the country's supreme leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada, warned it would likely rise further. Earlier, a tribal leader from Paktika said survivors and rescuers were scrambling to help those affected.

"The local markets are closed and all the people have rushed to the affected areas," Yaqub Manzor told AFP by telephone. Photographs and video clips posted on social media showed scores of badly damaged mud houses in remote rural areas. Some footage showed local residents loading victims into a military helicopter.

Offers of help

Even before the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan's emergency response teams were stretched to deal with the natural disasters that frequently struck the country. But with only a handful of airworthy planes and helicopters left since the hardline Islamists returned to power, any immediate response to the latest catastrophe is further limited.

"The government is working within its capabilities," tweeted Anas Haqqani, a senior Taliban official. "We hope that the International Community & aid agencies will also help our people in this dire situation."

The United Nations and European Union were quick to offer assistance.

"Inter-agency assessment teams have already been deployed to a number of affected areas," the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) in Afghanistan tweeted.



Pope offers prayers for the victims

Tomas Niklasson, EU special envoy for Afghanistan, tweeted: "The EU is monitoring the situation and stands ready to coordinate and provide EU emergency assistance to people and communities affected."

Afghanistan is frequently hit by earthquakes—especially in the Hindu Kush mountain range, which lies near the junction of the Eurasian and Indian tectonic

plates. Scores of people were killed and injured in January when two quakes struck rural areas in the western province of Badghis, damaging hundreds of buildings. In 2015, more than 380 people were killed in Pakistan and Afghanistan when a 7.5-magnitude earthquake ripped across the two countries, with the bulk of the deaths in Pakistan.

From the Vatican City, Pope Francis offered prayers for the victims of the latest quake. "I express my closeness with the injured and those who were affected," the 85-year-old pontiff said at the end of his weekly audience. Aid agencies and the United Nations say Afghanistan needs billions of dollars this year to tackle its ongoing humanitarian crisis.

Aid agencies have particularly stressed the need for greater disaster preparedness in Afghanistan, which remains extremely susceptible to recurring earthquakes, floods and landslides. The quake was felt as far away as Lahore in Pakistan, 480 kilometres (300 miles) from the epicentre, according to responses posted on the USGS and European Mediterranean Seismological Centre (EMSC) websites. — AFP



LONDON: A video grab from footage broadcast by the UK Parliament's Parliamentary Recording Unit (PRU) shows Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson speaking during the weekly Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) session in the House of Commons, in London. — AFP

UK unveils plans to override ECHR after Rwanda spat

LONDON: The UK government Wednesday introduced legislation allowing it to override rulings by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), after a judge in Strasbourg blocked flights removing asylum seekers to Rwanda. Deputy Prime Minister Dominic Raab denied the government intended to join Russia in abandoning the European Convention on Human Rights, which is overseen by the Strasbourg court. But Raab, who is also justice secretary, said the new "Bill of Rights" would "restore a healthy dose of common sense" to Britain's judicial system.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson vowed anew to implement the Rwanda plan, aimed at deterring immigrants from making illegal crossings of the Channel. Rights groups and church leaders have criticised the policy as "shameful". British courts earlier this month gave the go-ahead for the first removal flight to leave, but the ECHR stepped in at the last minute with an interim ruling to block its departure. A UK judicial review of the plan's legality is due next month.

In the meantime, Raab told parliament the Bill of Rights would "strengthen our proud tradition of freedom" dating back to Magna Carta in 1215. Magna Carta is considered the cornerstone of freedom, modern democracy, justice and the rule of law and has formed the basis of legal systems across the world-and human rights conventions.

"We will strengthen the separation of powers in this country, affirming the supremacy of the Supreme Court, being explicit that the UK courts are under no obligation to follow the Strasbourg case law and indeed are free to diverge from it," said Raab.—AFP

Egypt detains 3 over viral video of mosque dancing

CAIRO: Egypt has detained three men after a video clip allegedly showing one of them singing and dancing at a mosque went viral online, the prosecutor's office said.

In the footage, a man can be seen dancing, jumping and singing with a microphone in a mosque to a song by Ahmed Moza, a popular performer of "mahraganat" music. Mahraganat-Arabic for festivals—is a genre of electro street music that has gone mainstream in Egypt.

It emerged from working class neighbourhoods, with artists using cheap or free software to mix traditional music with electronic sounds, creating loud, eclectic beats. But authorities have banned performers of mahraganat since their songs are considered vulgar.

The prosecution said an investigation had been launched into the video "showing a man singing into a microphone and dancing inside a mosque", in a statement issued late Tuesday.

"The police were able to identify the three accused, the one who sings and dances, the one who filmed it and the one who posted the video on social networks," it said.

Mona Seif, sister of jailed Egyptian dissident Alaa Abdel Fattah, said the three men had been "interrogated by the state security" service.

They faced charges of "terrorism" and "dissemination of false information", the activist said in a Facebook post.

Egypt has regularly been denounced over its "abysmal" human rights record since President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi took power in 2013. An estimated 60,000 political prisoners are behind bars in Egypt, according to human rights defenders.

Independent entertainers often complain of being under pressure or unable to find sponsors in a country where the state or branches of the security apparatus control more and more production companies.

Last month, three comedians were released after more than a month in detention on charges of "false information" and "terrorism" after posting a song on TikTok denouncing inflation that was shared widely. — AFP

COVID subvariants cast shadow over European summer

PARIS: A resurgence of COVID-19 cases in Europe, this time driven by new, fast-spreading Omicron sub-variants, is once again threatening to disrupt people's summer plans. Several Western European nations have recently recorded their highest daily case numbers in months, due in part to Omicron sub-variants BA.4 and BA.5. The increase in cases has spurred calls for increased vigilance across a continent that has relaxed most if not all coronavirus restrictions. The first resurgence came in May in Portugal, where BA.5 propelled a wave that hit almost 30,000 cases a day at the beginning of June. That wave has since started to subside, however. Italy recorded more than 62,700 cases on Tuesday, nearly doubling the number from the previous week, the health ministry said. Germany meanwhile reported more than 122,000 cases on Tuesday. France recorded over 95,000 cases on Tuesday, its highest daily number since late April, representing a 45-percent increase in just a week.

Cases have also surged in Britain, where there has been a seven-fold increase in Omicron reinfection, according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS). The ONS blamed the rise on the BA.4 and BA.5 variants, but also said Covid fell to the sixth most common cause of death in May, accounting for 3.3 percent of all deaths in England and Wales.

BA.5 'taking over'

Mircea Sofonea, an epidemiologist at the University of Montpellier, said Covid's European summer wave could be explained by two factors. One is declining immunity, because "the protection conferred by an infection or a vaccine dose decreases in time," he told AFP. The other came down to the new subvariants BA.4 and particularly BA.5, which are spreading more quickly because they appear to be both more contagious and better able to escape immunity. Olivier Schwartz, head of the virus and immunity unit at the Pasteur Institute in Paris, said BA.5 was "taking over" because it is 10 percent more contagious than BA.2.

"We are faced with a continuous evolution of the virus, which encounters people who already have antibodies—because they have been previously infected or vaccinated—and then must find a selective advantage to be able to sneak in," he said.

But are the new subvariants more severe? "Based on limited data, there is no evidence of BA.4 and BA.5 being associated with increased infection severity compared to the circulating variants BA.1 and BA.2," the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) said last week. But rising cases can

result in increasing hospitalisations and deaths, the ECDC warned.

Alain Fischer, who coordinates France's pandemic vaccine strategy, warned that the country's hospitalisations had begun to rise, which would likely lead to more intensive care admissions and eventually more deaths. However, in Germany, virologist Klaus Stohr told the ZDF channel that "nothing dramatic will happen in the intensive care units in hospitals".

Return of the mask?

The ECDC called on European countries to "remain vigilant" by maintaining testing and surveillance systems. "It is expected that additional booster doses will be needed for those groups most at risk of severe disease, in anticipation of future waves," it added.

Faced with rising cases, last week Italy's government chose to extend a requirement to wear medical grade FFP2 masks on public transport until September 30. "I want to continue to recommend protecting yourself by getting a second booster shot," said Italy's Health Minister Roberto Speranza, who recently tested positive for Covid. Fischer said France had "clearly insufficient vaccination rates" and that a second booster shot was needed. Germany's government is waiting on expert advice on June 30 to decide whether to reimpose mandatory mask-wearing rules indoors. The chairman of the World Medical Association, German doctor Frank Ulrich Montgomery, has recommended a "toolbox" against the Covid wave that includes mask-wearing, vaccination and limiting the number of contacts. — AFP

DELEGATION OF THE EUROPEAN UNION TO THE STATE OF KUWAIT

CALL FOR TENDERS FOR SECURITY SERVICES

Reference number
EEAS/DELKWTK/2022/CPN/0019
Contract notice
2022/S 115-323064 of 16/06/2022

The Delegation of the European Union to the State of Kuwait has launched a call for tender for security services.

Please find under the link below all the information you need in order to participate:

<https://etendering.ted.europa.eu/cft/cft-display.html?cftId=10668>