

International

China 'iPhone city' tightens COVID rules after protests

Beijing orders six million people into lockdown

BEIJING: China has ordered six million people into lockdown in a city where violent protests broke out at an iPhone factory over COVID isolation policies and working conditions. Hundreds of workers took to the streets around the vast iPhone factory in Zhengzhou on Wednesday, confronting hazmat-clad personnel wielding batons in a rare display of public anger in China.

In the wake of the unrest, Zhengzhou authorities ordered mass testing and an effective lockdown for several districts in the central Chinese city starting Friday. City centre residents cannot leave the area unless they have a negative Covid test and permission from local authorities, and are advised not to leave their homes "unless necessary".

The restrictions will affect more than six million people but do not cover the iPhone factory, where workers have already been under COVID restrictions for weeks. One worker told AFP the protests had begun over a dispute over promised bonuses at the factory, run by Taiwanese tech giant Foxconn. Many workers were also incensed by "chaotic" living conditions, said the worker, who wished to remain anonymous.

Foxconn on Thursday issued an apology, blaming a "technical error" in its payment systems for the salary issues and saying it "fully understands" the concerns of employees. "The company will also try its best to actively solve the concerns and reasonable demands of employees," it said. Apple told AFP it had representatives on the ground at the factory and was "reviewing the situation and working closely with Foxconn to ensure their employees' concerns are addressed".

Zero-COVID fatigue

The curbs in Zhengzhou are part of China's national zero-tolerance approach to COVID, which involves gru-

elling lockdowns, travel restrictions and mass testing. However, nearly three years into the pandemic, COVID cases are now higher than they have ever been in China. There were 31,444 domestic infections on Wednesday, the National Health Commission reported, the highest since the pandemic began.

The numbers are relatively small when compared with China's vast population of 1.4 billion or global caseloads at the height of the pandemic. But under the zero-COVID policy, even small outbreaks can shut down entire cities and land the contacts of infected patients in strict quarantine. The unrelenting zero-COVID push has given rise to fatigue and resentment among swathes of the population, sparking sporadic protests and hitting productivity in the world's second-largest economy.

The Foxconn protests have been among the highest-profile bouts of unrest. Several cities including Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Chongqing have tightened COVID restrictions as cases have climbed. The capital now requires a negative PCR test result within 48 hours for those seeking to enter public places such as shopping malls, hotels and government buildings. Schools across the city have moved to online classes.

The southern manufacturing hub of Guangzhou - where nearly a third of the latest COVID cases were found - has built thousands of temporary hospital rooms to accommodate patients. A series of new rules announced by the central government this month appeared to signal a shift away from zero-COVID, easing quarantine requirements for entering the country and simplifying a system for designating high-risk areas.

But China has yet to approve more effective mRNA vaccines for public use and only 85 percent of adults over 60 had received two doses of domestic vaccines by mid-



BEIJING: Health workers in personal protective equipments (PPE) carrying COVID-19 coronavirus testing swabs and tubes are seen on bicycles along a street in Beijing on November 24, 2022. —AFP

August, according to health authorities. Shijiazhuang, a city near Beijing that was seen as a pilot for testing reopening strategies, reversed most of its easing measures

this week. "The path to reopening may be slow, costly and bumpy," Ting Lu, chief China economist at Nomura, said in a note. —AFP

Indonesia rescuers race to find dozens missing after quake

CIANJUR: Indonesian authorities deployed heavy machinery, helicopters and thousands of personnel Thursday in a desperate effort to locate dozens trapped in rubble by an earthquake that killed 272 people, as hopes of finding survivors faded. Some have been pulled alive from the hulk of twisted metal and concrete in dramatic rescues in the town of Cianjur in West Java, including a six-year-old boy who spent two days under the wreckage without food or water.

Officials said 39 people were still missing and believed trapped, including a seven-year-old girl, as rescue efforts were delayed by hammering rains and aftershocks. But the rescue of the young boy Azka alive, captured on video, gave relatives and rescuers some hope. "Once we realized Azka was alive everybody broke into tears, including me," 28-year-old local volunteer Jeksen Kolibu told AFP on Thursday. "It was very moving, it felt like a miracle."

In the worst-hit district of Cugenang, scores of rescue workers drilled on Thursday through big slabs of concrete and removed roof tiles at a destroyed house where they believed a young girl was buried. Her dis-

traught mother watched on as they worked. Other rescuers used digging tools, hammers and their bare hands to clear the debris in the delicate mission to find seven-year-old Cika. "She was playing outside, I was cooking in the kitchen, suddenly the earthquake happened, so fast, only two seconds, my house collapsed," her mother Imas Masfahitah, 34, told AFP at the scene.

"My instinct tells me she is here because she liked playing here," she said, referring to the house of the girl's grandmother where the search is focused. "Whatever happens I will try to accept it." Authorities later suspended the search for Cika for the evening, saying they would resume the rescue effort on Friday. "We still hope that there are survivors. The proof is that Azka survived yesterday," Suharyanto, the head of the national disaster mitigation agency (BNPB), who like many Indonesians goes by one name, told a news conference Thursday.

'Pray for us'

The death toll from Monday's earthquake was expected to rise further with around 2,000 people wounded, some of them critically, and at least two villages still cut off. It rose by one on Thursday after the body of a 64-year-old was found, Suharyanto said. Thousands of emergency workers were using excavators to break through blocked roads to get to the villages and deploying helicopters to drop vital aid to people still trapped there.



CIANJUR: Imas Masfahitah walks past as rescue personnel work to find her missing child believed to be trapped in the rubble of a collapsed house at Cugenang in Cianjur, West Java on November 24, 2022, following a 5.6-magnitude earthquake. —AFP

But the BNPB chief said it was too dangerous to use heavy machinery digging for victims because of fears of collapsing structures or more landslides. The rescue operation is expected to continue beyond the 72-hour window viewed as the best period to find victims alive. "Hopefully, in one or two days, after the weather is good, (we can) deploy heavy equipment (and) more victims are found," Suharyanto said. Indonesian President Joko Widodo visit-

ed Cianjur again on Thursday, and said 39 people were believed missing in the district of Cugenang alone. "This afternoon, we will concentrate on this spot," he told reporters. Widodo said only 24 patients remained at the town's Sayang hospital, down from 741. Residents of the district said they had never experienced anything like it before. "I don't know why the impact in Cugenang is especially bad. It's probably fate, God has decided," Adek, 52, told AFP. —AFP

TV host's party makes breakthrough in Nepal

KATHMANDU: An anti-establishment television host will win a seat in Nepal's parliament after his new party tapped into voter discontent towards the Himalayan republic's elderly leadership, partial election results showed Thursday. Rabi Lamichhane, 48, made his name through combative interviews with public officials and hidden-camera stings on corrupt bureaucrats - populist credentials that channeled anxieties over a teetering economy.

A revolving door of prime ministers - most serving less than a year - and a culture of horse-trading fuelled perceptions before the vote that established leaders were out of touch with Nepal's most pressing problems. Lamichhane won nearly 60 percent of all ballots cast in his Chitwan constituency, ousting a minister from the ruling Nepali Congress. At least five other candidates from his National Independent Party (NIP) - formed just five months before the election - have won their seats, with four others on track to win.

The party is expected to be allocated more seats in the proportional representation section of the vote - Nepal has a mixed first-past-the-post and party-list system - which could make it the fourth or even third-largest party in parliament. Among its winning candidates is lawyer

Sobita Gautam, 27, who told AFP that voters were "fed up" with established parties and leaders ignoring their concerns. "This is a mandate for a younger generation in the driving seat," she added. "I will become a bridge between the people and the parliament."

The NIP campaigned on a pledge to tackle the cost of living and widespread graft, both of which emerged as key campaign issues with the economy still in the doldrums from the coronavirus pandemic. The government has banned imports of liquor and other goods to shore up its foreign exchange reserves after COVID devastated the vital tourism industry and dried up remittances from the huge number of Nepalis working abroad.

'Vented frustrations'

Political analyst Jeevan Baniya told AFP that the NIP and several candidates from other minor parties had fared well in urban areas where "the public vented their frustration over the non-performance of their previous representatives". Incumbent Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba, 76, who has been serving for the fifth time, was safely re-elected in his constituency. Also re-elected were the leaders of Nepal's two other main parties - aged 70 and 67 - who have themselves both held office as premier twice.

Though Nepal's entrenched political veterans are still expected to dominate the 275-seat assembly, Baniya said new anti-establishment lawmakers could play a key role in forming the next government. "Initial results show that they will have a significant presence in the parliament that would require the dominant parties to at least approach them or work with them," he added.

Sunday's elections were the second since a new consti-



PADAMPUR: Former television host and Independent Party's candidate in Nepal's general election Rabi Lamichhane (right) meets residents during a door-to-door election campaign event in Padampur. —AFP

tution was installed in 2015, ushering in a new political order after the conclusion of Nepal's traumatic Maoist insurgency. The decade-old civil war ended in 2006, having claimed more than 17,000 lives and prompting the abolition of the monarchy, bringing former rebels into the government fold. Since then the ex-guerrillas have alternated in power with another communist party and Deuba's Nepali Congress in various coalitions. —AFP

Capital showdown

Khan was ousted by Shehbaz Sharif in a no-confidence vote in April after the economy went into a tailspin and he lost the support of the top military brass. Pundits have suggested Sharif's coalition picked that moment to secure the right to select the next army chief, who will steer elections due no later than next October.

Munir served as ISI chief under Khan, but his stint ended in June 2019 after just eight months following a reported falling out with the former cricket star. Since leaving office Khan has held a series of mass rallies, frequently making unfounded claims that he was ousted by a US-led foreign conspiracy, and questioning the military's role in politics. Earlier this month he ramped the rhetoric higher still, accusing Sharif and an army officer of plotting an assassination attempt that saw him shot at a rally in eastern Punjab province. —AFP

Pakistan names ex-spy-master as army chief

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan's government nominated a former spymaster Thursday to be the next military chief, a position long considered the real power in the nuclear-armed Islamic nation of 220 million people. Syed Asim Munir, currently quartermaster general, will replace General Qamar Javed Bajwa, who is retiring this month after serving as chief of army staff since November 2016. "The process has completed in accordance with the law and constitution," Defence Minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif told reporters, adding the nomination had been sent to the president for confirmation.

Pakistan's military, the world's sixth largest, holds

undue influence over the nation and has staged at least three coups since independence in 1947, ruling for more than three decades. Even during periods of civilian rule, the army chief has long been considered the real kingmaker and the appointment is freighted with huge political significance. The army chief also has to handle multiple domestic security threats from rising militancy, as well as the delicate balance of power with arch-rival India, against who Pakistan has fought three wars.

Munir, the most senior of six officers considered for the top job, previously served as head of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) spy bureau. He takes over at a time when Pakistan is riven by political strife, with former prime minister Imran Khan rallying supporters to stage mass protests pressing the government to call a snap election. "The political process is very weak and democratic institutions are almost at a collapse," analyst Zahid Hussain told AFP. "In this situation, the army automatically becomes an arbiter of power."

Grace follows tragedy with birth of babies

CIANJUR: Death descended on Cianjur when an earthquake struck the central Indonesian town this week, but several new mothers also provided some joy for grief-stricken residents. At least three babies were born in the same evacuation tent just a day after the magnitude 5.6 tremor killed 271 people, according to West Java's governor Ridwan Kamil. The provincial official gave one of the babies her name after she was born on Tuesday evening: Gempita Shalihah Kamil. The name Gempita was inspired by the Indonesian word for earthquake, he said, before giving her his own last name.

"Behind this disaster, and the many who passed away, Allah also gave his grace with the birth of babies who would continue this journey of human civilisation," the governor said Wednesday in an Instagram post liked nearly 300,000 times. Indonesian media reported her birth widely because of Kamil's intervention, calling it "a gift". A video of him holding the newborn baby, as her mother Dewi lay on the floor, accompanied Kamil's post. Dewi said she feared for the baby's condition in her womb as she fell down when the tremor hit. She ran to the nearest community health centre for checks.

"It was difficult to find the heartbeat. Local midwives helped to stimulate (it)," Dewi said in an interview broadcast on Kompas TV Thursday as she held her fourth child in her arms. She took only around 30 minutes to give birth to her new daughter. Nova Dwiyanto, a doctor from the Social Affairs Ministry, said he received reports that at least two babies were born in the tent, including one prematurely at eight months. "Thank God ... (they) were helped to safely give birth," Dwiyanto told Kompas TV. He said the two babies and their mothers were "in good health" after checkups.

The quake could also affect infants, even though they were safely in their mothers' wombs when it struck. A US study published in September showed that pre-natal babies during a natural disaster are at a higher risk of developing psychological and behavioural disorders. But for these mothers whatever comes next mattered little as their births were a ray of light amid the darkness, at least for a moment. Dewi and Kamil were shown surrounded by friends and relatives, happy despite the carnage outside. As the governor uttered the child's name, they shouted in jubilation - "Praise be to God!" —AFP



KARACHI: A man watches a news television broadcast of the nomination of the next Pakistan's army Chief General Syed Asim Munir (on television 2nd right), at a market in Karachi on November 24, 2022. —AFP