

International

Zero-COVID in China key to Xi legacy as he eyes third term

China argues zero-COVID places human life above material concerns

BEIJING: For many in China, years of gruelling lockdowns and privacy invasions aimed at extinguishing COVID have caused misery. For President Xi Jinping, the virus curbs are a triumph. His zero-tolerance approach to COVID has become synonymous with the efforts to cement his authority over China and its ruling Communist Party (CCP).

The endgame begins on October 16, when thousands of party delegates will gather in Beijing for a major party congress at which he is expected to secure a historic third term. "Xi's legacy and the legitimacy of the CCP are bound to the success of the zero-COVID campaign," Diana Fu, an expert on Chinese domestic politics at the Brookings Institution think tank, told AFP.

While the rest of the world has largely moved to live with COVID, Xi has insisted on draconian policies aimed at eliminating the virus. The approach has crippled growth in the world's second-largest economy, which was already struggling with a debt-laden property sector and high youth unemployment. But Xi has dug in his heels, declaring zero-COVID China's most "economic and effective" path forward, while maintaining policies that have deepened the state's control over the lives of its 1.4 billion people.

Tests and QR codes

The headline-grabbing planks of the campaign continue to be the snap lockdowns—sometimes confining tens of millions of people to their homes for weeks or months. In one of the recent shutdowns, some residents in the megacity of Chengdu were not allowed to go outside even when an earthquake shook their apartment buildings.

And in the economic hub of Shanghai, a months-long lockdown led to rare scenes of protests from middle-class and wealthy Chinese. Public frustration has also pushed past China's internet censors and onto social media. In one of the highest-profile cases, a bus crash in rural Guizhou province that killed 27 people on the way to a COVID quarantine facility sparked a surge of online criticism. General curbs

that erode privacy and limit movement have also caused anger and resentment.

Residents in many cities must obtain a negative coronavirus test every few days to gain access to public spaces. They then use their smartphones to scan QR codes at entrances to offices, malls and restaurants and bring up their latest test results.

A green icon indicates they are free to enter, while red or amber means they may have, respectively, tested positive or passed near someone who has. That could lead to anything from a few days of home isolation to weeks at a quarantine facility.

The system also tracks people's movements, leaving it open to abuse, such as when authorities were accused of thwarting anti-corruption protests this year by turning participants' codes red. Before the pandemic, China's citizens were already under heavy surveillance. Steve Tsang, director of the SOAS China Institute at the University of London, said the COVID-monitoring apparatus was "in line with the model of social control" spearheaded by Xi.

'No choice'

China argues zero-COVID places human life above material concerns and has helped to avert the public health crises seen in other countries.

Officials have also voiced fears that the virus would overwhelm China's patchy healthcare system if allowed to spread unchecked, particularly in elderly rural communities. So far, China has reported just over 5,000 COVID deaths compared with more than a million in the United States.

But while the milder Omicron virus variant has reduced the risk of reopening in many countries, China's curbs continue to extract hefty economic and social costs. "They have to abandon zero-COVID ultimately," said Jin Dong-yan, a professor at Hong Kong University's School of Biomedical Sciences, calling it "wrong and against all scientific evidence".

The policy's initial success has created a sense of inertia among policymakers, according to Allen Wu, a professor at Nanjing University's medical school



TIANJIN, China: File photo shows, a health worker taking a swab sample from a man to be tested for the COVID-19 coronavirus in China's northern Tianjin. For many in China, years of gruelling lockdowns and privacy invasions aimed at extinguishing COVID have caused misery. For President Xi Jinping, the virus curbs are a triumph. — AFP

who has advised the World Health Organization. "There is this mentality that we did such a wonderful job in 2020 and 2021... if we (now) do nothing and a huge number of people get infected, that basically gives away all you have achieved," he told AFP.

Many in China speak favourably of zero-COVID, with Fu of the Brookings Institution saying state propaganda had convinced most people of the need to cut cases "at all human and economic costs". "A vast number of Chinese citizens still support draconian measures despite evident personal suffering," she said. Even those at the extreme end of the

policy have no option but to submit. Airline engineer Ian Jiang has spent 200 days in isolation hotels throughout the pandemic, and China continues to enforce quarantines for overseas arrivals of up to two weeks. Jiang, 38, described the measures as "very inconvenient for my personal life".

"But that's the Chinese government's policy," said Jiang. "You have no choice." There is unlikely to be much overt opposition when Xi receives the adulation of party delegates at this month's Congress. "The campaign, no matter the actual socioeconomic outcomes, will continue to be hailed as a triumph of Chinese socialism," Fu said. — AFP



TOKYO, Japan: Photo shows a group of activists holding up placards with images of Japanese citizen Toru Kubota, who was detained in Myanmar, during a rally in front of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tokyo. — AFP

Myanmar junta jails Japanese filmmaker for ten years

YANGON, Myanmar: Myanmar's junta has jailed a Japanese filmmaker for 10 years, more than two months after he was arrested while filming an anti-coup protest, a military spokesman said Thursday. The military has clamped down on press freedoms since its coup last year, arresting reporters and photographers as well as revoking broadcasting licences while the country plunged into chaos. Toru Kubota, 26, was detained near an anti-government rally in commercial hub Yangon in July along with two Myanmar citizens. He was sentenced on Wednesday to seven years in jail for breaching a law that criminalises spreading information detrimental to state security and peace and tranquility, a junta spokesman said in a statement.

It added he had also received a three-year sentence for encouraging dissent against the military—a charge that has been widely used in the crackdown. The sentences would be served concurrently, the junta statement added. A diplomat at Japan's embassy in Myanmar said Kubota also faces a charge of breaching immigration law, with the next hearing expected on October 12. Japan's foreign ministry said it had been providing consular support and would "continue to appeal to the Myanmar authorities for the early release of Mr Kubota."

The filmmaker had arrived in Myanmar in July and was filming a "documentary featuring a Myanmar per-

son", his friend Yoshitaka Nitta told a press conference in Tokyo in August. According to a profile on the FilmFreeway website, Kubota has previously made documentaries on Myanmar's Muslim Rohingya minority and "refugees and ethnic issues in Myanmar".

'Slap in the face'

Japan is a top donor to Myanmar and has longstanding relations with the country's military. After the coup, Tokyo announced it would halt all new aid, though it stopped short of imposing individual sanctions on military and police commanders. Kubota's jailing is a "slap in the face" for Tokyo, said Phil Robertson of Human Rights Watch. "It's time for Japan to stop playing games, and move to support real international sanctions that will squeeze the junta's revenue sources."

In September, Japan's defence ministry said it would halt a training programme for members of Myanmar's military from next year over the junta's executions of four political prisoners. The junta's execution of the four in July, in the face of international calls for clemency, was Myanmar's first use of capital punishment in decades and sparked international outrage.

Media watchdog Reporters Without Borders (RSF) said Kubota's arrest and "trial behind closed doors... is symptomatic of the military junta's abysmal disregard for the rule of law". RSF's Asia-Pacific director Daniel Bastard urged Japan to stand-firm and obtain his release as "Myanmar's generals have become accustomed to using foreign journalists as bargaining chips in their relations with foreign governments". Kubota is the fifth foreign journalist to be detained in Myanmar, after US citizens Nathan Maung and Danny Fenster, Robert Bociaga of Poland and Yuki Kitazumi of Japan—all of whom were later freed and deported. —AFP

the initial assumption is that there is so much pressure from the overflowing river that pushed and knocked down the school's wall. The water overflowed into the school," he said.

Local media reported the three dead were students at the MITSN 19 school in South Jakarta. The police official did not confirm the identity of the victims. Footage on social media showed some teenage students crying in panic while trying to evacuate from the school, submerged in waist-deep waters.

Five people were killed in floods across the city last February that submerged entire neighbourhoods and sent thousands into shelters. In 2020, Jakarta saw some of its deadliest floods in years after downpours that also triggered landslides.

At least 67 people in the capital and nearby cities were killed in that disaster, with the floodwaters reaching the second floor of some buildings after rivers burst their banks. — AFP

Tortured domestic worker seeks compensation in HK

HONG KONG, China: An Indonesian woman who suffered daily "torture" as a domestic worker in Hong Kong went to court Thursday to seek compensation from her employers over treatment that left her physically scared and mentally traumatised.

The abuse meted out to Kartika Puspitasari, 40, made headlines a decade ago and sparked protests over the treatment of foreign helpers in Hong Kong. Her employers, who were convicted and jailed, waged a two-year campaign of violence and humiliation against her, including burning her with an iron and beating her with a bike chain. "I still feel a heavy trauma that makes me emotionally vulnerable. I often have nightmares and tremble whenever I see people who look like my former employers," Kartika said via an interpreter at a press conference. "I lost my confidence and also feel insecure because of the visible scars on my body, which are still sore and painful."

Kartika said she returned home in 2014 without being compensated for two years' worth of labour, as her monthly wages were never paid. With help from activists, she returned to Hong Kong and testified in court on Thursday to sue her abusers for more than HK\$930,000 (\$119,000) — a rare attempt to pursue damages directly. Hong Kong is home to around 340,000 migrant domestic workers, mainly women from Indonesia and the Philippines. Rights advocates have long argued that they are acutely vulnerable to various forms of abuse and exploitation.

A tearful Kartika told reporters she was still afraid to speak publicly about her experience. "At the time, I was so desperate... I had no friends, couldn't contact anyone and was tortured every day." Eni Lestari, spokesperson of the Asian Migrant Coordinating Body in Hong Kong, said Kartika's case was "extreme, but not an isolated one". Abused migrant workers often lack proper food and rest—a situation made worse by the pandemic which gave employers excuses to keep helpers in the house, she added. Hong Kong's system, which requires domestic workers to live in their employers' households and pays a minimum monthly salary of HK\$4,730, was akin to "modern slavery", activists said. It is common for victims not to speak out because they cannot afford to seek redress in Hong Kong, especially when their visas expire at the end of their contracts, they added. Kartika's ex-employers—who were jailed for three and a half years and five and a half years respectively and have completed their sentences—did not appear in court on Thursday for the civil suit. — AFP

India bolsters search for 20 still missing after avalanche

DEHRADUN, India: Rescuers stepped up efforts Thursday to find around 20 people still missing 48 hours after an avalanche in the Indian Himalayas claimed at least nine lives including a record-breaking woman climber.

A group of 41 climbing trainees and instructors were caught in Tuesday's massive snowslide near the summit of Mount Draupadi ka Danda II in the northern state of Uttarakhand. Nine bodies have been recovered so far and 12 people have been rescued, an official from the Nehru Institute of Mountaineering told AFP. Police on Wednesday had said 10 bodies had been retrieved. On Thursday, a team from the High Altitude Warfare School joined the Indian air force and local disaster agencies to help with the challenging rescue operations. An advance helicopter landing ground has been prepared at 4,900 metres (16,000 feet) above sea level and a trial landing was successful on Thursday morning, the Indo-Tibetan Border Police said. Sunil Lalwani, a trainee climber who was rescued, credited the instructors for saving many lives.

"We were 50-100 metres from the summit with our instructors ahead of us, when suddenly an avalanche hit us and took everyone down," Lalwani was quoted as saying by the Hindustan Times.

"It happened in a matter of seconds and we were dumped in a crevasse. We were somehow able to breathe... It's because of them (instructors) that we are alive today." Among the bodies recovered was that of accomplished climber Savita Kanswal, who had summited Everest this year.

Kanswal was an instructor with the expedition and had been feted by the climbing community for summiting the world's highest peak and nearby Makalu in just 16 days—a women's record. Fatal climbing accidents are common in the Himalayas, home to Everest and several of the world's highest peaks. In August, the body of a mountaineer was recovered two months after he fell into a crevasse while crossing a glacier in the neighbouring state of Himachal Pradesh. And last week, renowned US ski mountaineer Hilaree Nelson's body was found on the slopes of Nepal's Manaslu peak after she went missing skiing down the world's eighth-highest mountain. —AFP

3 dead in Jakarta floods after school wall collapses

JAKARTA, Indonesia: At least three people died in Indonesia Thursday after a flood in capital Jakarta surged into a school and caused a wall to collapse, a police official told local media. The Greater Jakarta metropolitan region houses around 30 million people and is regularly hit by floods in the rainy season.

"According to the information we received, 3 people died," Multazam Lisendra, police chief of Cilandak district in south Jakarta, told broadcaster Kompas TV. "For the cause, it needs to be investigated further, but



JAKARTA, Indonesia: A woman makes her way through a street flooded due to heavy rain in a residential area in Jakarta on October 6, 2022. — AFP