



Filipinos march in reverence of Catholic icon

Iran's regime divided on how to tackle protests



BEIJING: Flight attendants walk at the arrival area at the Beijing Capital International Airport in Beijing on January 8, 2023. —AFP

China ends quarantine for travellers

Chinese rush to plan trips abroad on popular travel websites

BEIJING: China lifted quarantine requirements for inbound travellers on Sunday, ending almost three years of self-imposed isolation even as the country battles a surge in COVID cases.

The first people to arrive expressed relief at not having to undergo the gruelling quarantines that were a fixture of life in zero-COVID China.

And in Hong Kong, where the border with mainland China was re-opened after years of closure, more than 400,000 people were set to travel north in the coming eight weeks.

Beijing last month began a dramatic dismantling of a hardline zero-COVID strategy that had enforced mandatory quarantines and punishing lockdowns. The policy had a huge impact on the world's second-biggest economy and generated resentment throughout society that led to nationwide protests just before it was eased.

At Shanghai's Pudong International Airport, a woman surnamed Pang told AFP Sunday she was thrilled with the ease of travel. "I think it's really good that the policy has changed now, it's really humane," she told AFP.

"It's a necessary step I think. COVID has become normalised now and after this hurdle everything will be smooth," she said.

Chinese people rushed to plan trips abroad after officials last month announced that quarantine would be dropped, sending inquiries on popular travel websites soaring.

But the expected surge in visitors has led more than a dozen countries to impose mandatory COVID tests on travellers from the world's most populous nation as it battles its worst-ever outbreak. China has called travel curbs imposed by other countries "unacceptable", despite it continuing to largely block foreign tourists and international students from travelling to the country.

China's COVID outbreak is forecast to worsen as it enters the Lunar New Year holiday this month, during which millions are expected to travel from hard-hit megacities to the countryside to visit vulnerable older relatives.

And Beijing has moved to curb criticism of its chaotic path out of zero-COVID, with its Twitter-like Weibo service saying it had recently

banned 1,120 accounts for "offences against experts and scholars".

'We just walked out'

At Beijing airport Sunday, barriers that once kept international and domestic arrivals apart were gone, as were the "big whites"—staff in hazmat suits long a fixture of life in zero-COVID China.

One woman, there to greet a friend arriving from Hong Kong, said the first thing they'd do was grab a meal. "It's so great, we haven't seen each other in so long," Wu, 20, told AFP.

"They are studying over there, and we can meet each other directly in Beijing... It's been a year," she added. At Shanghai airport, one man surnamed Yang who was arriving from the United States said he had not been aware that the rules had changed. "I had no idea," he told AFP.

"I'd consider myself extremely lucky if I only need to do quarantine for two days, turned out I don't have to do quarantine at all, and no paperwork, we just walked out like that, exactly like in the past," he added.

"I'm quite happy not needing to be in quarantine," another woman being picked up by her boyfriend who declined to give her name told AFP. "Who wants to be in quarantine? Nobody."

Hong Kong opens

In China's southern semi-autonomous city of Hong Kong, visitors streamed across the border as travel restrictions with the Chinese mainland were eased. Hong Kong's recession-hit economy is desperate to reconnect with its biggest source of growth, and families are looking forward to reunions over the Lunar New Year.

Official data showed some 410,000 people in Hong Kong planned to travel north in the next two months, while some 7,000 people in the mainland planned to travel south on Sunday.

At the Lok Ma Chau checkpoint near Shenzhen, a postgraduate student from mainland China surnamed Zeng told AFP they were happy to cross with no more restrictions. "I am happy as long as I don't have to be quarantined—it was so unbearable," Zeng said. — AFP



KAFFRINE: A general view of the scene of a bus accident in Kaffrine, central Senegal, on January 8, 2023 where at least 40 people have died and scores were injured when two buses collided. — AFP

40 killed in Senegal bus disaster

DAKAR: Forty people were killed and 85 were injured when two buses crashed in a head-on collision overnight on an arterial road in Senegal's central Kaffrine region, the government said on Sunday. Images of the incident showed the completely mangled front end of a white bus, with blood-flecked seats, personal items and a shoe strewn around the tree-lined crash site.

Road accidents are common in Senegal, largely because of driver error, poor roads and decrepit vehicles, say experts, but the latest disaster has caused one of the heaviest losses of life from a single incident in recent years.

In a statement, the government announced three days of national mourning beginning Monday, with flags to be flown at half-mast throughout the country. President Macky Sall will visit the crash site just outside of the village of Sikilo on Sunday, it said.

"In view of this tragedy, the head of state extends his deepest condolences to the families of the victims and wishes a speedy recovery to the injured," the government said. Public prosecutor, Cheikh Dieng, said in a statement that early investigations suggested a public passenger bus suffered a burst tyre and swerved off course. It then crashed "head-on with another bus coming in the opposite direction", he said.

'Tragic'

The statement said the incident happened around 0330 GMT. It is "a tragic accident," Kaffrine mayor Abdoulaye Saidou Sow, who is also the Minister of Urbanism, told AFP. Speaking from Kaffrine, he said President Sall would be joined there by the prime minister and several other ministers on Sunday.

Opposition politician Ousmane Sonko announced on Twitter that he would postpone a scheduled fundraising program in light of the accident. "We bow before the memory of the deceased, offer our very sincere condolences to their grieving loved ones and to all Senegalese and pray for the merciful rest of their souls as well as a speedy recovery for the injured", he said.

Colonel Cheikh Fall, who heads operations for the National Fire Brigade, told AFP the victims were taken to a hospital and medical centre in Kaffrine. The wreckage has since been cleared and normal traffic has resumed on the road, he said. The governor and local officials have visited the scene, he added. In a tweet, President Sall said that after the period of national mourning finished, a government council will be held to "take firm measures on road safety".

In October 2020, at least 16 people were killed and 15 more injured when a bus collided with a refrigerated lorry in western Senegal. The bus, with a 60-seat capacity, was heading to Rosso near the border with Mauritania, the fire brigade said, adding that the number of people onboard was unknown. Local media said at the time that the truck was hauling fish to Dakar. —AFP

46 Ivorian soldiers return home after Mali pardon

BAMAKO: Forty-six Ivorian soldiers detained in Mali since July arrived home late Saturday, according to an AFP reporter at the airport, a day after they were pardoned by the neighbouring country's junta. The troops, whose detention triggered a bitter diplomatic row between the countries, were arrested on July 10, 2022, after arriving in the Malian capital Bamako.

Mali accused them of being mercenaries, while Ivory Coast and the United Nations say they were flown in to provide routine backup security for the German contingent of the UN peacekeeping mission. On Saturday, the 46 arrived at an airport in the Ivorian economic capital Abidjan.

After their plane landed at 11:40 pm (2340 GMT), the uniformed soldiers disembarked one by one, each brandishing a small Ivorian flag. They were greeted by President Alassane Ouattara before entering the presidential pavilion at the airport where their families were waiting for them.

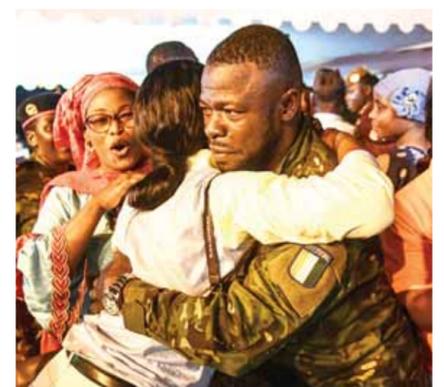
Ouattara said he hoped the two countries could move on from the diplomatic spat. "Now that this crisis is behind us, we can resume normal relations with the brother country of Mali, which needs us and which we also need," he said in a speech at the airfield. A spokesman for the soldiers thanked Ouattara, and "the Ivorian people for their support and active solidarity".

"We are happy and relieved to return to the motherland," he said. On December 30, a Bamako court sentenced the soldiers to 20 years in prison, while three women among the original 49 arrested received death sentences in absentia. They were convicted of an "attack and conspiracy against the government" and of seeking to undermine state security, public prosecutor Ladj Sara said at the time. The sentence came in the run-up to a January 1 deadline set by leaders from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) for Mali to release the soldiers or face sanctions. But on Friday, Mali's junta leader Assimi Goita pardoned all 49.

Diplomatic efforts

An Ivorian delegation had travelled to Mali for talks before the trial opened, and the Ivorian defence ministry had said the dispute was "on the way to being resolved". An agreement reached between Mali and Ivory Coast at the time had left open the possibility of a presidential pardon.

The Malian government on Friday cited a memo-



ABIDJAN: One of the 46 Ivorian soldiers who was arrested in July and condemned by Malian justice, and pardoned by the president of the transition Assimi Goita, is welcomed by his parents after a ceremony at Abidjan airport. — AFP

random of understanding the two countries had signed "on the promotion of peace and the strengthening of relations of friendship, brotherhood and good neighbourliness between the Republic of Mali and the Republic of Ivory Coast".

It also thanked Togo's President Faure Gnassingbe, who mediated in the row, but denounced the "aggressive position" of ECOWAS leader Umaro Sissoco Embaló.

Long-standing tensions

Relations between Mali and its West African neighbours were strained before the arrests, since elected president Ibrahim Boubacar Keita was toppled in August 2020 by officers angered at failures to end a jihadist insurgency.

Ivorian President Ouattara is considered one of the most intransigent West African leaders towards Mali's junta. After the troops were detained, the UN acknowledged some procedural "dysfunctions" in a note addressed to the Malian government, saying that "certain measures have not been followed".

The Ivorian presidency also admitted "shortcomings and misunderstandings". But the row escalated in September, when diplomatic sources in the region said Mali wanted Ivory Coast to acknowledge its responsibility and express regret for deploying the soldiers. Bamako also wanted Ivory Coast to hand over people who had been on its territory since 2013 but who are wanted in Mali, they said. Ivory Coast rejected both demands and was prepared for extended negotiations to free the troops, the sources said. — AFP