

International

China reports almost 60,000 COVID-related deaths in a month

Millions of elderly in China are not fully vaccinated

BEIJING: China's health authorities reported on Saturday almost 60,000 COVID-related deaths in just over a month, the first major death toll released by the government since it loosened its virus restrictions in early December. China has been widely accused of underreporting its number of coronavirus fatalities since the abandonment of its zero-COVID policy.

Only a few dozen deaths had been recorded officially in December before Saturday's announcement, despite evidence of crematoriums and hospitals being overrun. But a National Health Commission (NHC) official said on Saturday China had recorded 59,938 COVID-related deaths between December 8, 2022, and January 12. The figure refers only to deaths recorded at medical facilities, with the total number likely to be higher.

The data includes 5,503 deaths caused by respiratory failure directly due to the virus, and 54,435 deaths caused by underlying conditions combined with COVID, Jiao Yahui, head of the NHC's Bureau of Medical Administration, told a news conference.

Health officials insisted Wednesday it was "not necessary" to dwell on the exact number. Beijing revised its methodology for categorising COVID fatalities last month, saying it would count only those who die specifically of respiratory failure caused by the virus.

This was criticised by the World Health Organization, which said the new definition was "too narrow". WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said the organisation was continuing to "ask China for more rapid, regular, reliable data on hospitalisation and deaths, as well as... viral sequencing".

Beijing, however, has insisted it has been transparent with the international community about its data,



FENGYANG: Picture shows COVID-19 patients being treated at Fengyang People's Hospital in Fengyang county, east China's Anhui Province.

urging the WHO to "uphold a scientific, objective and just position".

Elderly at risk

Health officials said Saturday the average age of those who had died was 80.3 years, with more than 90 percent of fatalities above 65 years old. Most suffered from underlying conditions, they said. Millions of the elderly in China are not fully vaccinated, with President Xi Jinping's government criticised for not prioritising immunisation campaigns

among the country's most vulnerable citizens. Officials also suggested on Saturday that the peak of the current wave might have passed. Just under 2.9 million patients visited fever clinics on December 23, they said, but the figure had dropped to 477,000 nationwide on January 12.

They said the number of severely ill patients in hospitals was still high but that the peak appeared to have been in early January. The priority, they said, was to monitor the situation in rural areas and focus on early detection and treatment for the most vulnerable. — AFP

Japan PM tells Biden that new era requires more military muscle

WASHINGTON: Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida pledged Friday alongside US President Joe Biden to modernize his country's military, warning that Russia's invasion of Ukraine had opened a dangerous new era and could embolden China. Welcoming Kishida at the White House, Biden hailed the Japanese government's announcement last month that it will double defense spending over the next five years and develop new capabilities.

"Let me be crystal clear: the United States is fully, thoroughly, completely committed to the alliance and more importantly to Japan's defense," Biden said. Japan has been officially pacifist since its defeat in World War II but has been shedding past sensitivities as China rapidly expands its military and North Korea relentlessly tests missiles.

In a speech after his White House meeting, Kishida cast his defense strategy as a historic turning point in the US-Japan alliance in the same league as the mutual defense treaty of 1960. "Russia's aggression against Ukraine has marked the complete end of the post-Cold War world," Kishida said at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies.



WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida walk through the colonnade of the White House in Washington, DC, on their way to the Oval Office. — AFP

"If we let this unilateral change in the status quo by force go unchallenged, it will happen elsewhere in the world, including Asia," Kishida said, in likely a veiled allusion to fears of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. The relationship with China, Kishida said, "is the most critical challenge for both Japan and the United States."

'Major shift' on Russia

Japan has joined Western powers in imposing sanctions on Russia and has provided humanitarian, although not military, aid to Ukraine since President Vladimir Putin invaded in February 2022. Kishida called it a "major shift" in Japan's policy toward Russia following marathon but unsuccessful talks to resolve a dispute over islands seized by Soviet troops shortly after Tokyo's surrender in 1945.

Kishida was visiting Washington at the end of a tour of Group of Seven nations as Japan starts its year leading the elite club of industrial democracies, in which the country is proud to be the only non-Western member.

"Japan's participation in the measures against Russia transformed the fight against Russia's aggression against Ukraine from a transatlantic one to a global one," Kishida said. Biden in the Oval Office meeting hailed Japan's firmness on Ukraine.

"We're stepping up to hold Putin accountable for his unprovoked war in Ukraine and I want to thank you, thank you for your strong leadership on this from the first conversation," Biden said. As part of its new defense policy, Japan is going on a shopping spree and is looking to buy hundreds of Tomahawk cruise missiles, which currently are only in the arsenals of the United States and Britain.

Japan will also for the first time develop a "counter-strike" capability—being able to hit launch sites for missiles that threaten it.

In talks this week between the Japanese foreign and defense ministers and their counterparts, the two countries also agreed that attacks in space could invoke their mutual defense treaty amid rapid Chinese work on satellites. "Our security alliance has never been stronger," said a joint statement by Biden and Kishida.

"The two leaders reaffirmed that the alliance remains the cornerstone of peace, security and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific." They also renewed a call to maintain "peace and stability" in the Taiwan Strait.

China under President Xi Jinping has been increasingly forceful on Taiwan and staged major military exercises in August after a defiant visit to the self-governing democracy by Nancy Pelosi, then the speaker of the US House of Representatives. Japan is also planning to enter joint exercises with the United States and Australia and has coordinated diplomacy as part of the four-way "Quad" that also includes India. — AFP



LEDNICE: A woman in traditional costume of Podluzi (area in south Moravia) vote at the polling station during the Presidential election in Lednice, 60 km south of Brno, South Moravia, Czech Republic. — AFP

Three frontrunners as Czechs vote for new president

PRAGUE: Polling stations reopened for day two of Czech presidential polls Saturday with a billionaire, a general and an academic leading in the first of a likely two-round vote seen as too close to call. The winner will replace Milos Zeman, an outspoken and divisive political veteran, following a period marked by the country's 2022 EU presidency as the war in Ukraine raged. The victor will face record inflation in the central European country of 10.5 million people, as well as bulging public finance deficits related to the war in Ukraine. Polling stations will close at 2:00 pm (1300 GMT) on Saturday, with first-round results expected later in the day.

Unless a candidate wins more than 50 percent outright—which is considered unlikely—the two top-placed contenders will go head-to-head in a second round on January 27-28. "If you asked me to place a bet (on the result), I wouldn't," Metropolitan University Prague political scientist Petr Just told AFP.

Populist ex-prime minister Andrej Babis, retired general Petr Pavel and university professor Danuse Nerudova are vying to become only the fourth president since the Czech Republic was founded in 1993 following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Casting his ballot at a school in Prague, voter Ivan Andrys said the next president should be impartial and act in lockstep with the government on foreign policy, something Zeman often failed to do.

"Of course, he or she must not give (in) to pressures... whether political or economic," Andrys said. Business tycoon and former prime minister Babis, 68, is the fifth wealthiest person in the Czech Republic, according to Forbes magazine.

Pavel, 61, is a former paratrooper who was decorated as a hero of the Serbo-Croatian war during which he helped to free French troops from a war zone. He went on to become the chief of the Czech general staff and chair of NATO's military commit-

tee. Nerudova, the youngest frontrunner at 44, has a strong focus on social issues and is counting largely on the backing of younger voters.

'More of a diplomat'

Voting in his home village of Cernoucek, north of Prague, Pavel said the main goal was to restore the dignity of the presidential office after Zeman's 10 years in office. "We should also establish normal communication and try to achieve results not through confrontation but by cooperation," he added.

Babis, voting in Pruhoonice just south of Prague, said he was counting on his political experience to carry him to victory. "I know most presidents. And my advantage is that I know what all ministries are dealing with," he added.

Nerudova relished the experience as she voted in the southern town of Kurim. "For me, it is already a success because no woman has been in this position before and I am glad that it will serve as an example to all young people that it makes sense to get involved," she said.

Polls suggest that both Pavel and Nerudova would beat Babis if they face him in the second round. Five candidates—two senators, a far-right lawmaker, a former university rector and an entrepreneur—trail behind the top three favourites.

The Czech president's role is largely ceremonial, but the head of state names the government, picks the governor of the central bank and constitutional judges, and serves as top commander of the armed forces.

But Zeman, a controversial politician who once confessed to a daily diet of six glasses of wine and three shots of spirits, repeatedly exploited loopholes in the constitution to increase his influence. Following a busy Friday at polling stations, Saturday morning was much slower in turnout with the odd dog-walker or shopper showing up in a school in central Prague.

Voter Anna Nina Schumannova said she expected the new president "to be more of a diplomat" than Zeman. "He or she should be reliable, think of all the people, make our country flourish and develop, ensure peace and make our children happy," she said. — AFP

Pell, who died in Rome aged 81, was a towering figure in the Catholic Church but deeply divisive at home in Australia, where he had been accused of molesting two teenage choir boys while archbishop of Melbourne. From humble beginnings, Pell climbed the ranks to become one of Pope Francis's most trusted advisers inside the Vatican.

He was also the highest-ranking Catholic to be imprisoned for child sexual abuse, spending 12 months in prison before his convictions were quashed on appeal. Pell died of heart complications related to a hip surgery he underwent in a Rome hospital on Tuesday, according to the Vatican's official news website.

Myanmar air strike kills 5

BANGKOK: A mother and her toddler were among five people killed in a military air strike in Myanmar's east, Karen rebels and an aid group said Saturday. Myanmar has been in turmoil since Aung San Suu Kyi's civilian government was toppled in a military coup almost two years ago, ending the southeast Asian nation's brief period of democracy.

Four junta fighter jets dropped eight bombs on villages in Hpapun district on Thursday afternoon, killing five people, the Karen National Union said in a statement. Another four people were wounded, the ethnic rebel group said. The Karen live largely in Myanmar's east near the border with Thailand. The Myanmar junta was contacted for comment but did not respond. Christian aid group the Free Burma Rangers said its staff arrived at Lay Wah village in Hpapun hours after bombs destroyed two churches and a school.

"Some villagers had come back and they showed us the mangled bodies of the five who had been killed," the group said in a statement. "A mother and her baby were instantly killed." A Baptist pastor and a Catholic priest were among the dead, the Free Burma Rangers statement said. The toddler was almost three.

Villagers had fled into the jungle before the air strikes, the group said, and fatalities would have been much higher had children still been in their classrooms. "We saw shrapnel-damaged homes and roofs blown off," it said. A Karen National Liberation Army spokesman told AFP there had been another air strike on Friday. "We will continue to see these types of incidents because we don't have air defence systems," he said. More than 2,700 civilians have been killed since the military grabbed power in February 2021, according to a local monitoring group. — AFP

HK gangster arrested

HONG KONG: A self-professed Hong Kong gangster has learned the benefits of keeping a low profile after a viral video of him exiting a Porsche to berate a minibus driver led to his arrest for cocaine possession.

The 35-year-old appeared in court on Saturday after the clip capturing their traffic dispute helped police track down the wanted fugitive. It shows the man getting out of the sports car and shouting profanities at the driver while claiming to be a triad member—an offence in Hong Kong. He bashes the window of the vehicle while knocking the glasses off the driver's face and waving a stick. But his fit of road rage has cost him dearly after police busted him and three others on Thursday for drug possession, with officers seizing 1.7 kilograms (3.7 pounds) of suspected cocaine. "This man disregarded the safety of other road users and further disregarded law and order by publicly claiming to be a triad member," Chief Inspector Wong Chi-tang told reporters. He added that police made the arrest after identifying the man from the video.

Meanwhile, the victim of the man's outburst has been dubbed the "most educated minibus driver" in Hong Kong after it was discovered he holds a master's degree in transport planning and had quit a lucrative job to serve commuters from behind the wheel. — AFP

His body will be returned to Australia and buried in the crypt of St Mary's Cathedral in Sydney, church officials said. But an Australian state leader has ruled out a taxpayer-funded memorial for Cardinal Pell, saying it would be "deeply distressing" for sexual abuse survivors. Premier Daniel Andrews on Thursday said Pell's legacy had been permanently tainted.

"We will never ever forget victim-survivors of institutional child sexual abuse at the hands of the Catholic Church," he told reporters. State funerals are reserved for high-profile figures who have made significant contributions to Australian public life. — AFP

Funeral held for cardinal Pell

VATICAN CITY: Several dozen people including bishops, cardinals and archbishops turned out for the funeral of the controversial Cardinal George Pell in the Vatican on Saturday. The ceremony in St Peter's Basilica was led by Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, with Pope Francis arriving in a wheelchair for the last few minutes.