

NEWS IN brief

Xi postpones Japan visit over coronavirus

AFP, Tokyo

A state visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping has been postponed as preventing the outbreak of the new coronavirus is "the biggest challenge" facing both countries, Japan's top government spokesman said yesterday. "It is necessary to give first priority to this," Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga told reporters in Tokyo. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe formally invited Xi to visit during last year's G20 summit in Osaka. The last state visit by a Chinese president to Japan was in 2008, and Xi's trip was being cast as a sign of warming bilateral ties.

Former UN chief Javier Perez de Cuellar dead

AFP, Lima

Former UN chief Javier Perez de Cuellar, who was known for his peace-making efforts including brokering a ceasefire in the Iran-Iraq war, died Wednesday in his native Peru, aged 100, his son said. Perez de Cuellar served as UN secretary general from 1981 to 1991, when he was often described as a "pacifist by vocation and nature." Lauded by his countrymen as one of the most illustrious Peruvians of his era, Perez de Cuellar led the United Nations through a period marked by the fight against world hunger, the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq.

Russian court fines Putin critic's group

REUTERS, MOSCOW

A Russian court yesterday fined opposition politician Alexei Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation 500,000 roubles (\$7,536) for failing to identify itself as a foreign agent on social media, Navalny's spokeswoman said. Russia's Justice Ministry formally labelled the group a foreign agent in October after Navalny called on people to attend rallies that grew into Moscow's biggest sustained protest movement in years before fizzling out.



A man uses his mobile phone to take photographs of posters carrying messages on symptoms of coronavirus disease inside hospital premises in Kolkata, India yesterday. *Inset*, students sit for the Gujarat Board examination as they wear facemasks provided by the school management at Sadhana Vinay Mandir school, following the coronavirus outbreak, in Ahmedabad. PHOTO: REUTERS, AFP

Coronavirus symptoms

2019 Novel Coronavirus identified in Wuhan, China

Common signs of infection

- Fever
- Cough
- Diarrhea
- Shortness of breath
- Breathing difficulties
- Gastro-intestinal symptoms

Severe cases

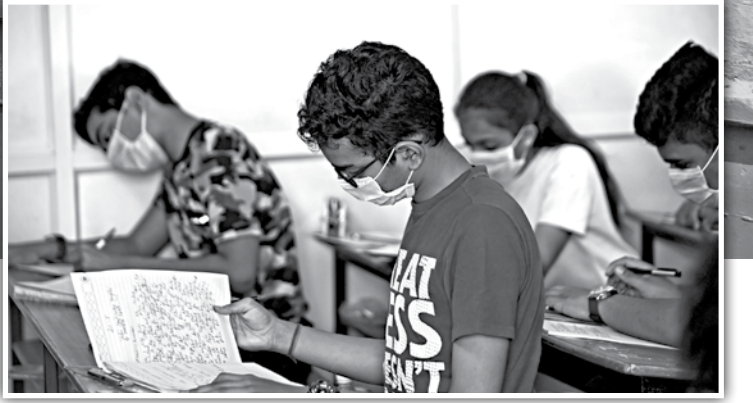
- Pneumonia
- Severe acute respiratory syndrome
- Kidney failure
- DEATH

Treatment

- No vaccines or antiviral drugs available
- Symptoms can be treated

Sources: WHO/CDC

Courtesy: Department of Microbiology, ID & BG Hospital, Kolkata -10
Financial Assistance: IDSP Cell, Department of Health and Family Welfare, Government of West Bengal



CORONAVIRUS BATTLE

N Korea's Kim sends 'get well soon' wishes for South

REUTERS, Seoul

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has sent a letter expressing hope for South Korea to overcome a coronavirus outbreak, President Moon Jae-in's office said yesterday, as the South battles the biggest epidemic of the disease outside China.

The two sides' exchanges have ground nearly to a halt after the North closed borders and temporarily shut a joint liaison office in a border city to avert an outbreak, while the South added 438 infections yesterday to swell its tally to 5,766.

In the letter delivered on Wednesday, Kim voiced concern over Moon's health, and expounded what he described as his "honest view and position" regarding the situation on the Korean peninsula, Moon's office said, without elaborating.

"Chairman Kim wished to console our citizens who are fighting the coronavirus," Yoon Dohan, Moon's senior press secretary, told reporters.

"He said he believes



we will win, and hoped the health of southern compatriots will be protected."

Moon responded with a letter of thanks, Yoon added.

The rare message came less than two days after Kim's sister, Yo Jong, issued a statement attacking Moon's office for criticising a military drill by the North.

North Korea had resumed missile testing on Monday after a three-month pause, prompting Moon's office to urge a halt.

Kim Yo Jong, who is also a senior official of the North's ruling party, said the exercise was not meant to threaten anyone, deriding Seoul for what she called "perfectly foolish" words and acts.

'They were all beaten back'

Pentagon downplays new Taliban attacks; Nato chief warns of hard road to Afghan peace as violence soars

AFP, Washington

The Pentagon on Wednesday played down the gravity of new Taliban attacks in Afghanistan that cast doubts on a four-day old peace deal between the insurgent group and the United States.

Since the signing in Doha on Saturday, the militants have ramped up violence against Afghan forces, ending a partial truce and casting a pall over peace talks between Kabul and the Taliban, due to begin on March 10.

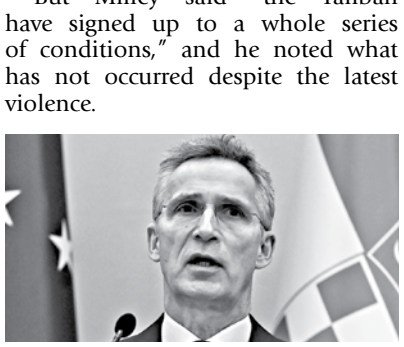
"There were a variety of attacks over the last 24 to 48 hours. And they were all beaten back," said General Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff for the US military.

"What is important, though, for the agreement: we're on day four, this was small, low level attacks, out on checkpoints, etcetera," he told the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Afghanistan's interior ministry spokesman Nasrat Rahimi on Wednesday detailed 30 attacks by the Taliban in 15 provinces over

the previous 24 hours that left four civilians and 11 Afghan soldiers, dead, as well as 17 insurgents.

But Milley said "the Taliban have signed up to a whole series of conditions," and he noted what has not occurred despite the latest violence.



"Of significance: there are no attacks on 34 provincial capitals, there are no attacks in Kabul. There's no high profile attacks, there's no suicide bombers, there's no vehicle-borne suicide, no attack against the US forces, no attack against the coalition," Milley said.

"There's a whole laundry list of these

things that aren't happening," he added.

Meanwhile, the head of Nato warned yesterday that western forces will only leave Afghanistan if the Taliban make good on their commitment to reduce bloodshed, as attacks surge.

The militants have ramped up violence against Afghan forces since signing a deal with Washington at the weekend, casting doubt over peace talks between Kabul and the Taliban, due to begin on March 10.

Nato Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg told AFP that a "long and hard" road to peace lay ahead but warned the Taliban that if they reneged on the agreement, foreign forces would not leave.

"It is a very difficult situation and Taliban must honour their commitment. We need to see reduction in violence," Stoltenberg told AFP in an interview in Zagreb, where he attended a meeting of EU defence ministers.

Form response teams to stop transmission

India's home ministry asks states amid coronavirus fears

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

India yesterday said that in addition to coronavirus cases related to travel, some cases of community transmission have also been observed in the country.

"Since, in addition to COVID 19 cases related to travel, some cases of community transmission have also been observed, it has been decided to involve district collectors and States have been asked to form rapid response teams as the district, block and village levels," the Indian Health Ministry said in a statement.

Separately, Health Minister Harsh Vardhan told the Rajya Sabha in a suo motu statement that the number of confirmed cases of coronavirus has gone up to 29 as of Wednesday. Of these, three from Kerala have recovered and have been discharged, he added.

Universal screening of air passengers coming from abroad has been mandated since Wednesday and started in most airports from last evening, he said.

According to Vardhan, a total of 3,542 samples have been sent for testing, of which 29 have been found to be positive for coronavirus till now. Testing of 92 samples is in process and 23 samples are being reconfirmed.

In the last three days, new travel-related cases have tested positive. These include one in Delhi and Telangana. Both the persons are clinically stable.

US panel hears of risks to Indian Muslims

Voices concern over Rohingya situation in Myanmar

AFP, Washington

Experts warned a US government panel on Wednesday that India's Muslims face risks of expulsion or other persecution under a citizenship law that has triggered major protests.

The hearing held inside Congress was called by the US Commission on International Freedom, which has been denounced by the Indian government as biased.

Ashutosh Varshney, a prominent scholar of sectarian violence in India, told the panel that the law championed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalists amounted to a move to narrow the democracy's historically inclusive and secular definition of citizenship.

"The threat is serious, and the implications quite horrendous," said Varshney, a professor at Brown University.

"Something deeply injurious to the Muslim minority can happen once their citizenship rights are taken away," he said.

Varshney warned that the law could ultimately lead to expulsion or detention -- but, even if not, contributes to marginalization.

"It creates an enabling atmosphere for violence once you say that a particular community is not fully Indian or its Indianness in grave doubt," he said.

The Indian parliament in December passed a law that fast-tracks citizenship for persecuted non-Muslim minorities from neighbouring countries.

Responding to criticism at the time from the US commission, which advises but does not set policy, India's foreign ministry said the law does not strip anyone's citizenship and "should be welcomed, not criticised, by those who are genuinely committed to religious freedom."

Fears are particularly acute in the northeastern state of Assam, where a citizens' register finalized last year left 1.9 million people, many of them Muslims, facing possible statelessness.

Palestinians check yesterday a house destroyed by the Israeli army in Birzeit near the city of Ramallah reportedly belonging to two Palestinian men accused of an attack that killed an Israeli in the summer.



PHOTO: AFP

Fighting in Rakhine, Chin states rages as Myanmar limits internet

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

Continued fighting between Myanmar's military and the Arakan Army armed group has left several people dead in recent days as the government continues a clampdown on the western region.

Activists and journalists have decried the internet blackout the government has imposed as part of the clampdown as a violation of human rights.

Reports on Tuesday said at least 11 civilians, including five Muslim Rohingyas, had been killed after being caught in the hostilities in Rakhine, a western state that is home to more than three million people.

In a statement, four United Nations human rights experts also said "credible reports" showed that more than 1,000 people had been displaced in the 10 days up to February 18. The Myanmar Times also quoted the Rakhine Ethnic Congress as saying that more than 120,000 have evacuated beginning in November 2018.

Since 2019, government forces have been embroiled in

a new conflict with the Arakan Army, an armed rebel group that wants more autonomy for the ethnic Rakhine people.

In 2017, a conflict between the military - also known as the Tatmadaw - and another rebel group, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, led to the exodus of at least 740,000 Rohingyas to neighbouring Bangladesh, drawing allegations of genocide.

Now, residents of Rakhine, as well as more than 125,000 Rohingyas still in refugee camps, are caught in the new wave of conflict.

As part of the government's response to the violence, it shut down the internet in early February in four townships in Rakhine and one town in neighbouring Chin state. The five towns impacted had been under temporary blackouts from June to August 2019, and join four other townships that have remained under a blackout since June 2019.

The decision to cut off the internet was revealed last month after Telenor, a Norway-based telecommunications group, announced that its Myanmar affiliate had been instructed to temporarily stop mobile internet services to these towns.



CORONAVIRUS FEARS

Thai full-moon party cancelled

AFP, Bangkok

A popular full-moon party in southern Thailand known for its raucous revelry has been cancelled because of the coronavirus, an official said yesterday, the latest hit to a tourism industry which foresees a loss of six million visitors this year.

Tourism is a cornerstone of Thailand's economy, and the virus has wreaked havoc as visitor numbers have dwindled in the wake of the epidemic.

Attracting some 40 million foreigners a year, the Tourism Authority of Thailand confirmed Thursday the country could see a loss of six million visitors in 2020.

FBI extremist surveillance was flawed: US report

AFP, Washington

Surveillance of "homegrown" US extremists by the FBI was flawed until 2019, a watchdog report said Wednesday, saying that the weaknesses may have allowed deadly attacks to occur.

The Department of Justice Office of the Inspector General (OIG) report said that the FBI had closed several assessments of suspects who went on to launch attacks.

"Since September 11, 2001, HVE (home-grown violent extremists) have carried out over 20 attacks in the United States, some of which occurred after the FBI closed a counterterrorism assessment or investigation," it said.

"The FBI had not taken a comprehensive approach to resolving deficiencies."

According to the FBI, the extremists were jihad-inspired individuals radicalized in the United States and not receiving orders from abroad.

The report focused on one of the Boston marathon bombers, Tamerlan Tsarnaev, who planted two home-made bombs near the finish line of the race in 2013, killing three people and injuring 264 others.

It said database searches and questioning of Tsarnaev, his parents and Tsarnaev's former girlfriend and wife "would have resulted in a more thorough assessment" before the attack.

The FBI also closed an assessment of Omar Mateen, who later shot and killed 49 people in Orlando's Pulse night club in 2016.

The case agent "was also assigned to work criminal matters and had little formal counterterrorism training," the report said.

The FBI has come under intense criticism after a 2017 leak exposed that its counterterrorism division had invented a new, unfounded domestic terrorism category it called "black identity extremism."

