

'INT'L CRIMES' IN MYANMAR

Facebook has not shared 'evidence'

Says UN investigator

REUTERS

The head of a UN investigative body on Myanmar said Facebook has not released evidence of "serious international crimes", despite vowing to work with investigators looking into abuses in the country including against the Rohingya Muslim minority.

Nicholas Koumjian, head of the Independent Investigative Mechanism on Myanmar (IIMM), told Reuters the social media giant was holding material "highly relevant and probative of serious international crimes" but had not shared any during year-long talks. He declined to give details of the material the IIMM had asked for.

Myanmar is facing charges of genocide at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) over a 2017 military crackdown on the Rohingya that forced more than 730,000 people to flee into neighbouring Bangladesh.

Myanmar denies genocide. UN investigators said Facebook had played a key role in spreading hate speech that fuelled the violence.

The UN Human Rights Council set up the IIMM in 2018 to collect evidence of international crimes in Myanmar to be used in future prosecutions.

"Unfortunately, to date, the Mechanism has not received any material from Facebook but our discussions continue and I am hopeful that the Mechanism will eventually receive this important evidence," Koumjian said on Monday.

His comments followed a move by Facebook last week to block a bid by Gambia, which brought the genocide case against Myanmar at the ICJ, to obtain posts and communications by members of Myanmar's military and police. The social media giant urged the US District Court for the District of Columbia to reject the demand, which it said would violate a US law that bars electronic communication services from disclosing users' communications.



This aerial view taken on Monday shows smoke billowing from a part of the Amazon rainforest reserve north of Sinop, in Mato Grosso State, Brazil. Official data showed a swath of Brazil's Amazon rainforest about the size of London -- more than 1,600 square kilometers (620 square miles) -- was cleared in July, down from the 2,250 km2 lost in July 2019.

PHOTO: AFP

BELARUS CRISIS

Opposition leader flees abroad

REUTERS, Minsk

Belarusian opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanouskaya yesterday said she had fled abroad for the sake of her children, after two nights of clashes following the contested re-election of strongman President Alexander Lukashenko.

Tikhanouskaya, a 37-year-old former English teacher, emerged from obscurity to mount the biggest challenge in years to Lukashenko, taking her husband's place in the campaign. Her husband, Syarhei, had popularised a protest movement that compared Lukashenko to a cockroach character from a children's fairytale. He was arrested in May.

"You know, I thought that this whole campaign really had hardened me and given me so much strength that I could handle anything," she said, explaining her decision in a sombre video released on her husband's YouTube channel.



She said she left the country to join with her children in Lithuania. She had moved them abroad during the election campaign over security concerns.

"But, probably, I'm still the weak woman I was in the first place... And I know that many people will understand me, many will judge me and many will hate me. But, you know, God forbid being faced with such a choice the I was faced with."

Both she and the Belarusian authorities said she had not been forced to leave. At least one person died as police clashed with protesters on Monday after the opposition accused Lukashenko of rigging the vote amid widespread criticism from Western leaders.

We have to 'save it ourselves'

Defying China, Hong Kongers rush to buy pro-democracy newspaper

AFP, Hong Kong

Hong Kongers rushed to buy pro-democracy newspaper Apple Daily yesterday in a show of support for its owner, who was arrested a day earlier as police rounded up critics of China.

A crackdown on dissent in Hong Kong has gathered pace since China imposed a sweeping security law in June, with opposition politicians disqualified and activists arrested for social media posts.

The moves have provoked outrage in the West and fear for millions who last year took to the streets to protest communist China's tightening grip on the semi-autonomous city.

In one of the most dramatic days of the crackdown, media tycoon Jimmy Lai was among 10 people detained under the new law on Monday as around 200 police officers searched the newsroom of his tabloid, which is unapologetically critical of Beijing.

In a display of solidarity for Lai, people in the city rushed to buy



Tuesday's Apple Daily, with the newspaper saying it had upped its print run to 550,000 from its normal circulation of 70,000.

One restaurant owner bought 50 copies at a news stand in the commercial district of Mong Kok and said he planned to give them away for free. "Since the government doesn't allow Apple Daily to survive, then we as Hong Kongers have to save it ourselves," the man, who gave his surname as Ng, told AFP, as dozens of people lined up around the city from the early hours.

The newspaper's front page showed

a picture of Lai being led away in handcuffs, with the headline "Apple will fight on".

With Hong Kongers too fearful to stage mass protests like last year, some looked to other inventive ways to show solidarity. Lai's arrest sparked a buying spree in shares of his media group, and between Monday morning and closing time on Tuesday its stock value rose by more than 1,100 percent.

Hong Kong's new national security law criminalises secession, subversion, terrorism and colluding with foreign forces. The most serious crimes under the law -- which was introduced on June 30 and is not supposed to be retroactive -- carry up to life in jail.

Lai, 71, was held on charges including colluding with foreign forces and fraud. Among the others arrested were two of Lai's sons, young pro-democracy activist Agnes Chow.

Hong Kong's police has said those arrested were part of a group that had previously lobbied for foreign sanctions.

STUDENT PROTESTS IN THAILAND

PM 'concerned' as call grows for reform of the monarchy

REUTERS, Bangkok

Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha yesterday said he is concerned about a growing student protest movement after another student group issued an unusually frank 10-point call for reform of the monarchy.

About 3,000 to 4,000 protesters chanted "Long live democracy" at Thammasat University on the outskirts of Bangkok on Monday night, with speeches calling for the resignation of Prayuth, who first took power in a 2014 coup, and an end to military domination of politics.

But protesters from a Thammasat University Pro-democracy Group also issued a 10-point call for reform of the monarchy, becoming at least the third student protest group to break a decades-long taboo on questioning its role and powers.

Thailand has strict laws against insulting or defaming the king, punishable by up to 15 years in prison.

Former army chief Prayuth told reporters he had watched the protests.

"Yes, I watched it, how can I not?" he said when asked about the students' demands.

"I am concerned," he said, but did not elaborate on what concerned him and did not comment on the demands for royal reform. Prayuth has warned protesters against involving the monarchy in their protests but said King Maha Vajiralongkorn, who took the throne after the death of his father in 2016, has asked him not to arrest anyone under the "lese majeste" laws.

Since the 2014 coup, activists have accused Prayuth of using the military's close association with the palace to justify its grip on power, including accusations of manipulating results of elections last year. Prayuth denies the allegations.

The students' new demands included reversal of a 2019 order that transferred two army units to the king's personal command and a 2017 law that gave him full control of the crown's extensive property holdings.

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Medical masks best, cotton good, bandanas worse: study

AFP, Washington

Health experts have determined that face coverings are a vital tool in reducing the spread of coronavirus -- but little research has been done into how different kinds of masks compare.

A new study has ranked 14 types of commonly available mask, finding that medical masks offer significantly more protection against droplet spread than cotton alternatives -- while bandanas and balaclavas don't do much at all.

The findings have public policy implications, particularly in the United States where authorities have encouraged the public to use textile masks and leave the medical products to health care workers because they are in short supply.

Masks are important because some 30-40 percent of people who are infected may not show symptoms but still unwittingly spread the virus when they cough, sneeze or just talk.

A team of scientists at Duke University created an inexpensive setup: people stood in a dark room and spoke the words

"Stay healthy, people" five times into the direction of an expanded laser beam, which was recorded with a cell phone camera. A computer algorithm was then used to calculate the number of droplets.

Professionally-fitted N95 masks -- hospital-grade protection worn by frontline workers in hospitals -- reduced droplet transmission to less than 0.1 percent.

Surgical or polypropylene masks were not far behind, bringing droplet transmission down by 90 percent or more compared to no face-coverings.

Hand-made cotton face coverings provided good coverage, eliminating 70 to 90 percent of the spray, depending on the number of layers and the pleating. But bandanas only reduced the droplets by about 50 percent.

Finally, N-95 masks with valves -- designed for industrial settings where the user's exhalation was less important than what they inhaled -- performed roughly on par with cotton masks. Health authorities have discouraged the use of valved N-95s.



A Palestinian woman argues with Israeli officers who arrived to force stop her from building a house, in Susya village in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, yesterday. Israel has decided to close its goods crossing with the Gaza Strip after militants in the Hamas-run territory fired rockets into the Mediterranean and launched incendiary balloons towards the Jewish state.

PHOTO: AFP

'Do I seem rattled?'

Trump briefly evacuated from White House press meet after shooting

AFP, Washington

US Secret Service agents shot and wounded a man who was apparently armed outside the White House on Monday, President Donald Trump said, after being briefly whisked away in the middle of a press conference.

A 51-year-old male approached a Secret Service officer standing at the corner of 17th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, one block from the White House, according to Tom Sullivan, the chief of the Secret Service Uniformed Division.

The suspect told the officer he had a weapon and ran "aggressively" towards him, drawing an object out of his clothes, Sullivan said in a statement that was broadcast on Twitter. The secret service had to fire, he added.

Both the suspect and the officer were taken to hospital, he said, without giving more information.

As the president was speaking to reporters in the White House briefing room, a Secret Service bodyguard



abruptly approached him and interrupted, saying in a quiet voice, "Sir, could you please come with me?" Trump and staff members left. Doors to the briefing room, still filled with journalists, were locked.

Outside, black-clad Secret Service agents with automatic rifles could be seen rushing across the lawn and took up positions behind trees. According to Fox News, whose camera team was outside, two shots were heard.

Minutes later, Trump reappeared at the press conference and announced that someone had been shot by the Secret Service outside the White

House grounds.

Trump, a Republican who faces a tough and bitterly divisive election on November 3, said he knew nothing about the identity or motives of the person shot. "It might not have had anything to do with me," he said.

Returning to the podium after the disruption, Trump appeared calm.

He resumed his virulent criticism of opposition Democrats and praise for his handling of the coronavirus crisis, which polls show two-thirds of Americans believe he has botched.

Questioned on whether the security incident had rattled him, Trump answered: "I don't know, do I seem rattled?"

"It's unfortunate that this is the world, but the world's always been a dangerous place," he said.

Trump went on to praise the US Secret Service, which is in charge of guarding the president, as "fantastic people, the best of the best."

"I feel very safe with Secret Service," he said. "A lot of terrific-looking people ready to go if something was necessary."

Mahatma Gandhi's iconic glasses go on sale in UK

AFP, London

A "rare and important" pair of iconic glasses worn by Indian independence hero Mahatma Gandhi look set to sell for tens of thousands of pounds after a British auction house put them up for sale on Monday.

The gold-plated spectacles were stuffed through the letterbox of East Bristol Auctions in southwest England last Friday, with a letter attached saying, "these glasses belonged to Gandhi, give me a call," auctioneer Andrew Stowe told Sky News.

"The spectacles formed an important and somewhat iconic part of Gandhi's overall appearance... a rare and important pair of spectacles," the auction house's website said of the lot.

Gandhi used to give away valuable items like gold to people who were in need or helped him somehow. The talismanic non-violent protestor gave the glasses to the vendor's uncle while he was working for British Petroleum in South Africa during the 1920s or 30s, said the auction house.

An auctioneer found them last Monday when he reopened for business after the weekend.

The item is due to go under the hammer on August 21, but has smashed expectations with online bidding already up to £50,000.

