

CPJ'S 2020 REPORT

Record number of journos jailed

AFP, New York

A record number of journalists were behind bars this year, a US-based watchdog said yesterday, accusing governments worldwide of suppressing the media and fueling misinformation amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

The annual report by the Committee to Protect Journalists found that 274 journalists were imprisoned in 2020 -- the highest number since the non-profit organisation began its survey in the 1990s.

The report also found that 26 journalists and media workers had been murdered this year, with Mexico listed as the world's most dangerous country for the press.

"It's shocking and appalling," CPJ Executive Director Joel Simon said in a statement.

"This wave of repression is a form of censorship that is disrupting the flow of information and fueling the infodemic," he added.

The worst offender was China for the second consecutive year, the survey found, with 47 reporters behind bars. Other top jailers were Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, with Belarus and Ethiopia.

While the US had no reporters in jail as of the report's release, the survey noted an "unprecedented" 110 had been arrested or detained through the course of the year.

The CPJ said the outgoing Trump administration bore some of the blame for the worsening global press freedom -- not only for the US president's lack of global leadership on human rights, but also his emboldening of authoritarians abroad with his hostility towards the media.



A Congress party activist waves a national flag sitting on a police barricade during a demonstration to protest against the government's agricultural reforms near the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party headquarters in New Delhi, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

NEWS IN BRIEF

Russia nursing fire kills 11

A fire ripped through an overcrowded retirement home in central Russia overnight, killing 11 vulnerable people as the blaze swept through the small wooden building, investigators said yesterday. The Investigative Committee, which probes major crimes, said it had opened a criminal investigation into possible negligence over the blaze in the Bashkortostan region south of the Ural Mountains. The victims -- seven men and four women -- were between 57 and 83 years old. Different possible causes for the fire were being considered, the official said, including faulty wiring or human error like smoking a cigarette in bed.

Kabul deputy governor killed

A deputy governor of Kabul province and his aide were killed yesterday by a bomb in the Afghan capital, officials said, the latest in a wave of targeted killings in the country. Mahbobullah Mohebi was killed when a bomb attached to his vehicle detonated while he was on his way to his office, the interior ministry said. Mohebi's secretary, who was travelling with him, was also killed and two bodyguards were wounded. In a separate attack in Kabul on Tuesday, a policeman was killed and two others wounded when gunmen attacked their checkpoint, officials said.

US takes Sudan off sponsors of terror blacklist

The United States on Monday removed Sudan from its state sponsors of terrorism blacklist and declared a "fundamental change" in relations, less than two months after the Arab nation pledged to normalise ties with Israel. US President Donald Trump had announced in October that he was delisting Sudan, 27 years after Washington first put the country on its blacklist for harbouring Islamist militants. As part of a deal, Sudan agreed to pay \$335 million to compensate survivors and victims' families from the twin 1998 al-Qaeda attacks on US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, and a 2000 attack by the jihadist group on the USS Cole off Yemen's coast.

UK PM to visit India



British Prime Minister Boris Johnson will travel to India next month in his first major bilateral visit to another country since taking power last year, his office said yesterday. During the trip, Johnson will invite India to join next year's G7 summit, which Britain is hosting, as one of three guest countries, alongside South Korea and Australia. The Indian trip is aimed at strengthening bilateral trade ties and investment, and cooperation in various areas including defence, security, health and climate change. The visit will coincide with India's annual Republic Day celebrations on January 26.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS



EU to unveil measures to rein in tech giants

AFP, Brussels

The European Union was scheduled to unveil tough draft rules targeting tech giants like Google, Amazon and Facebook, whose power Brussels sees as a threat to competition and even democracy.

The landmark proposals -- which come as Silicon Valley faces increasing scrutiny around the world -- could shake up the way Big Tech does business by menacing some of the globe's biggest firms with mammoth fines or bans from the European market.

EU sources told AFP the long-trailed legislation would see the internet behemoths facing fines of up to 10 percent of their EU turnover for breaking some of the most serious competition rules.

It also proposes banning them from the EU market "in the event of serious and repeated breaches of law which endanger the security of European citizens", one of the sources said.

The Digital Services Act and its accompanying Digital Markets Act will lay out strict conditions for doing business in the EU's 27 member countries as authorities aim to rein in the spread of disinformation and hate speech online, and Big Tech's business dominance.

Around ten of the largest companies -- including Google, Facebook, Apple, Amazon and Microsoft -- would be designated as internet "gatekeepers" under the legislation and subjected to specific regulations to limit their power over the market.

US vaccination drive gathers pace

Part of Europe set for tighter curbs as new virus variant emerges in England

AGENCIES

The United States kicked off a mass vaccination drive Monday hoping to turn the tide on the world's biggest coronavirus outbreak, as the nation's death toll passed a staggering 300,000.

The start of the desperately awaited vaccine program coincided with several European countries announcing new lockdowns amid spiraling infections, highlighting the long road to ending the global pandemic.

The vaccinations come at one of the darkest phases of the pandemic, with cases in the US and many other countries soaring, and health experts struggling against vaccine skepticism, lockdown fatigue and uneven adherence to safety rules.

An initial 2.9 million doses are set to be delivered to 636 sites around the country by Wednesday, with officials saying 20 million Americans could receive the two-shot regimen by year end, and 100 million by March.

The coronavirus has killed at least 1,621,397 people since the outbreak emerged in China last December, according to a tally from official sources compiled by AFP yesterday.

In Britain, Health Minister Matt Hancock announced that London will move into the highest level of restrictions from today with theatres, pubs and restaurants forced to close except for takeaway food.



UN says teachers should receive vaccine on priority basis

Oxfam says third of world's people get no state aid during pandemic

Hancock said scientists had identified a "new variant" of the virus in the south of England that may be causing infections to spread faster, though he added it was "highly unlikely to fail to respond to a vaccine." WHO Health Emergencies Programme Executive Director Mike Ryan said that there was no evidence to suggest that the mutation will impact the effectiveness of vaccines against the disease.

Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte said schools and

all non-essential shops would shut from Tuesday for five weeks over Christmas, while Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced a nationwide curfew from December 31 to January 4.

Germany also will enter a partial lockdown from today with non-essential shops and schools closed.

The head of the UN children's agency, UNICEF, called Tuesday for teachers to be among those given priority access to the Covid-19 vaccines.

"The Covid-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on children's education around the globe. Vaccinating teachers is a critical step towards putting it back on track," UNICEF chief Henrietta Fore said in a statement.

Teachers should be "prioritized to receive the Covid-19 vaccine, once frontline health personnel and high-risk populations are vaccinated," she said. "This will help protect teachers from the virus, allow them to teach in person, and ultimately keep schools open."

Meanwhile, Oxfam yesterday said that more than a third of the world's population - some 2.7 billion people - has not received government aid during the coronavirus pandemic.

An analysis of World Bank data conducted by the Nairobi-based charity found that while \$9.8 trillion of aid was spent by 36 wealthy nations, 59 low-income countries spent only \$42 billion to cope with the economic fallout of the pandemic.



A Ukrainian law enforcement officers uses a pepper spray to restrain a demonstrator during a rally of entrepreneurs and representatives of small businesses amid the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak in Independence Square in Kyiv, Ukraine, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

ABDUCTION OF 333 STUDENTS IN NIGERIA

Boko Haram claims responsibility

AFP, Kano

Boko Haram yesterday claimed it was behind the abduction of hundreds of students in northwestern Nigeria, in what appears to be a major expansion of the jihadist group's activities into new areas.

At least 333 students are still missing since the attack late Friday on the all-boys Government Science Secondary School in Katsina state -- hundreds of kilometres (miles) from Boko Haram's stronghold in northeastern Nigeria.

"I am Abubakar Shekau and our brothers are behind the kidnapping in Katsina," the leader of Boko Haram said in a voice message.

More than 100 gunmen on motorcycles stormed the rural school north of Kankara town, forcing students to flee and hide in the surrounding bush. A number of boys were able to escape, but many were captured, split into groups and taken away, residents told AFP. #BringBackOurBoys has been trending on social media since the weekend in reference to a similar hashtag set after Boko Haram abducted 276 girls in 2014 in Chibok, in northeastern Nigeria.

The weekend attack was initially blamed on armed groups locally known as "bandits". The army has said it has located the hideout of the "bandits", and that a military operation was under way.

The Boko Haram insurgency began in 2009 in northeastern Nigeria before spreading to neighbours including Niger, Cameroon and Chad. Since then, more than 36,000 people have been killed in Nigeria and two million forced to flee their homes, sparking a humanitarian crisis in the region.



UIGHUR GENOCIDE

ICC rejects complaint against China

AFP, The Hague

International Criminal Court prosecutors have rejected calls by exiled Uighurs to investigate China for alleged genocide and crimes against humanity, the chief prosecutor's office said in a report on Monday.

The Uighurs handed a huge dossier of evidence to the court in July accusing China of locking more than one million Uighurs and other mostly Muslim minorities in re-education camps and of forcibly sterilising women.

But the office of prosecutor Fatou Bensouda said it was unable to act because the alleged acts happened on the territory of China, which is not a signatory to The Hague-based ICC.

In its annual report Bensouda's office said "this precondition for the exercise of the court's territorial jurisdiction did not appear to be met with respect to the majority of the crimes alleged." There was also "no basis to proceed at this time" on separate claims of forced deportations of Uighurs back to China from Tajikistan and Cambodia, the ICC report said.

The Uighurs had argued that even though the alleged deportations did not happen on Chinese soil, the ICC could act because they happened on Tajik and Cambodian territory, and both of them are ICC members.

China has called the accusations baseless and says the facilities in Xinjiang region are job training centres aimed at steering people away from terrorism.

PURCHASE OF RUSSIAN S-400 DEFENSE SYSTEM

US sanctions Nato ally Turkey

Ankara says measures unjust; Russia, Iran condemn move

AGENCIES

The United States imposed long-anticipated sanctions on Turkey on Monday over Ankara's acquisition of Russian S-400 air defense systems, further complicating already strained ties between the two Nato allies.

Turkey condemned the sanctions as a "grave mistake" and urged Washington to revise its "unjust decision." It said sanctions would inevitably harm mutual relations.

Senior US officials said in a call with reporters that Ankara's purchase of the S-400s and its refusal to reverse its decision, despite repeated pleas from Washington, left the United States with no other choice.

The sanctions target Turkey's top defence procurement and development body Presidency of Defence Industries (SSB), its chairman Ismail Demir and three other employees.

The measures, which received a bipartisan welcome from the US



Congress, were announced under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) - the first time the act has been used against a fellow member of the Nato alliance.

Ankara acquired the Russian S-400 ground-to-air defenses in mid-2019 and says they pose no threat to Nato allies. But Washington has long threatened sanctions and last year removed Turkey from an F-35 jet program.

Ignoring the advice of aides, President Donald Trump had resisted imposing penalties on Turkey until giving the green light several days ago, sources familiar with the matter said.

It is not immediately clear what impact the sanctions will have on third countries such as European states that supply arms or defence components and work with Turkish defence firms.

But the Trump administration held off on more severe options that were presented for consideration, including sanctions that would hit the financial system or Erdogan personally.

Iran's foreign minister yesterday condemned the imposition of US sanctions on Turkey, saying it showed "contempt for international law".

"We strongly condemn recent US sanctions against Turkey and stand with its people and government," Mohammad Javad Zarif tweeted, using the hashtag "#NeighborsFirst".

"US addiction to sanctions and contempt for international law at full display again," he said.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov called the sanctions "another manifestation of an arrogant attitude towards international law" by the US.

UN calls for urgent shift to planet-friendly development

THOMSON REUTERS FOUNDATION, Barcelona

Under huge pressure from Covid-19, climate change and natural destruction, warning lights for the planet and societies are "flashing red" - and now is the time to choose a safer, fairer path for human development, the United Nations said yesterday.

"We are at an unprecedented moment in the history of humankind and in the history of our planet," it said in a report, urging efforts by governments, business and citizens to pursue a new kind of progress that protects the environment.

"The Covid-19 pandemic is the latest harrowing consequence of imbalances writ large," said the Human Development Report 2020, adding that the health catastrophe comes on top of pre-existing crises of global warming, species loss and inequality.

The report, which for the first time used a new global index factoring in environmental indicators, concluded that no country had yet been able to achieve a very high level of development without putting strain on natural resources.

"Many countries have achieved a great deal of progress but they also have done

so at the expense of great damage to the planet," said Achim Steiner, head of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which produces the report.

Over the past three decades, the Human Development Index has ranked nations each year according to health, education and standards of living.

But this year, the new version draws on two additional elements: a country's per capita carbon dioxide emissions and material footprint, which measures the amount of things like fossil fuels and metal used to make the goods and services it consumes.

The results paint "a less rosy but clearer assessment of human progress", the UNDP said. More than 50 countries dropped out of the very high human development group as measured by the new index, reflecting their large impacts on the climate and nature.

They include, for example, small nations such as Singapore and Luxembourg, with high levels of trade, movement and fossil-fuel energy, as well as oil and gas-rich Gulf states. Australia fell 72 places in the ranking of about 190 nations, while the United States lost 45 places and Canada 40.