

Myanmar soldiers found guilty in Rohingya atrocities

Three Myanmar military officers were found guilty by a court martial investigating atrocities against Rohingyas in conflict-ridden Rakhine state, the army announced yesterday. The rare action against military members came as Myanmar faces charges of genocide at the United Nations' top court over a brutal 2017 crackdown against the Rohingya. Some 750,000 Rohingyas fled to neighbouring Bangladesh with accounts of widespread murder, rape and arson. Rights groups accused security forces of committing atrocities in various villages, including Gu Dar Pyin, where they alleged at least five shallow mass graves had been found. No details were provided on the perpetrators, their crimes, or sentences. Rights groups Amnesty International called the lack of transparency on the court martial "alarming".

More in West now see China as major power

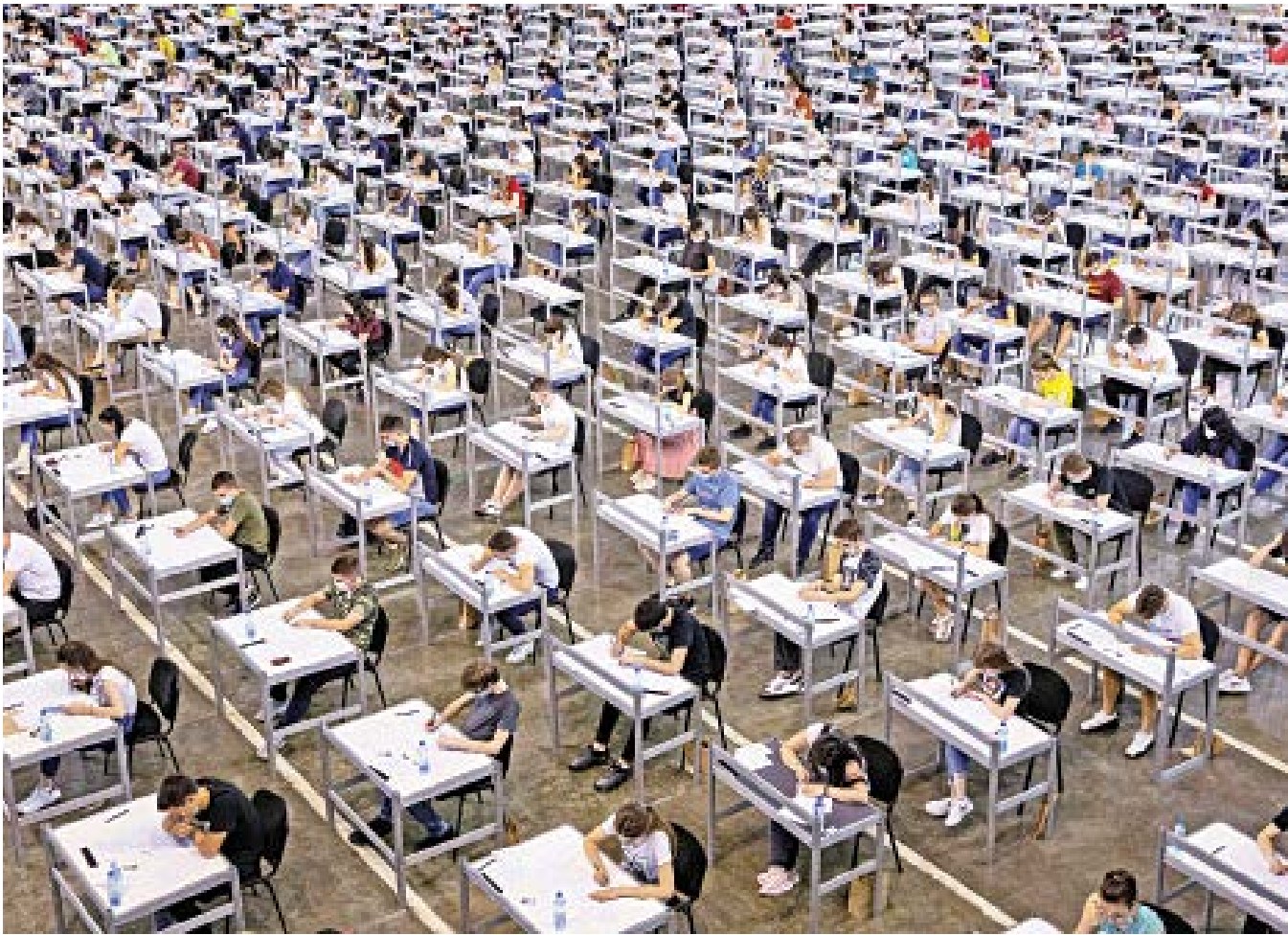
The coronavirus pandemic has led a growing number of Westerners to see China as a top power, with the lead of the United States slipping, a study said yesterday. A survey of French, German and US opinion released by the German Marshall Fund of the United States found significant increases in perceptions of Chinese influence since the outbreak of COVID-19 -- in which Beijing has alternately been portrayed as a culprit and an aid provider. The proportion of people who said China was the most influential global player shot up from 13 to 28 percent in France between surveys in January to May, from 12 to 20 percent in Germany and from six to 14 percent in the United States. The public in all three countries still said that the United States was the most influential nation but less overwhelmingly. In France, 55 percent of people said the United States was the top global player in May, down from 67 percent in January. Similar figures were reported in Germany.

Koalas may be extinct in New South Wales by 2050



Koalas in the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW) could become extinct by 2050 unless the government immediately intervenes to protect them and their habitat, a parliamentary inquiry determined after a year-long inquiry. Land clearing for agriculture, urban development, mining and forestry had been the biggest factor in the fragmentation and loss of habitat for the animals in NSW, the country's most populous state, over several decades. A prolonged, drought-fuelled bushfire season that ended early this year was also devastating for the animals, destroying about a quarter of their habitat across the state, and in some parts up to 81%.

SOURCE: REUTERS, AFP



Students take a university entrance exam in a hall of the Belgrade Fair, amid the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak in Belgrade, Serbia, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Ready for direct talks with Israel

Says Palestinians ahead of Israel's West Bank 'annexations' date

AFP, Ramallah

The Palestinians are prepared to renew long-stalled peace talks with Israel and to agree to "minor" territorial concessions, according to a counter-proposal to a contentious US plan.

A Palestinian Authority text sent to the international peacemaking Quartet and seen Monday by AFP, says the Palestinians are "ready to resume direct bilateral negotiations where they stopped," in 2014.

Palestinian prime minister Mohammed Shtayyeh said on June 9 that the PA had drafted a response to the US proposal but did not previously mention direct talks with the Israelis.

Israel's coalition government has set July 1 as the date from which it could initiate action on US President Donald Trump's Middle East controversial peace proposals.

Israel's deputy premier has said West Bank annexations must wait, allies and regional powers have



condemned the project, but hours before his government can move forward, the prime minister's plans remained unknown yesterday.

On Monday, Netanyahu's chief coalition partner, the defence minister and alternate prime minister, Benny Gantz, said annexation must be put on hold until the coronavirus crisis has been contained.

European powers including Britain, France and Germany as well as the UN are opposed to any unilateral West Bank annexations as a violation of international law that would undermine a two-state solution to

the conflict.

Netanyahu, in power since 2009, has pursued closer ties with Arab states, notably in the Gulf, seeking economic cooperation and to form a united front against common foe Iran.

But Gulf leaders have also made clear that moves towards annexation would threaten any warming relations with the Jewish state.

Israeli media have suggested action could be postponed indefinitely, or that Netanyahu might announce a symbolic gesture to limit international uproar, like the annexation of one Jewish settlement on the outskirts of Jerusalem.

Expert noted that Netanyahu is also watching the US election to see if Trump will be in office after January to defend his vision for Middle East peace. Presumptive Democratic party nominee Joe Biden has public opposed any unilateral annexations by Israel.

TERRITORIAL DISPUTE IN LADAKH WITH INDIA

China inscribes huge map onto disputed territory

AGENCIES

In a claim to disputed territory, Chinese forces in the contested Fingers region of Ladakh's Pangong Lake have inscribed a massive Mandarin symbol and map of China onto the ground they occupy as tensions persist between the Asian giants after violent clashes earlier in the month.

The inscriptions, located between 'Finger 4' and 'Finger 5' measure approximately 81 metres in length and 25 metres in breadth and are large enough to be clearly spotted by passing imagery satellites, NDTV reported.

'Fingers' in the region refers to the spurs which extend to the banks of the high-altitude Pangong Lake. India believes it has the right to patrol from 'Finger 1' to 'Finger 8' while China believes it has rights to patrol from 'Finger 8' to 'Finger 4'.

At the moment, 'Finger 4' is the boundary between the two sides after violent skirmishes between soldiers of both sides in May.

Meanwhile, China yesterday said it is concerned about India's decision to ban 59 Chinese mobile apps such as Bytedance's TikTok and Tencent's WeChat and was making checks to verify the situation.

India on Monday banned 59, mostly Chinese, mobile apps in its strongest move yet targeting China in the online space since a border crisis erupted between the two nuclear powers this month. In its order, India's technology ministry said the apps were "prejudicial to sovereignty and integrity of India, defence of India, security of state and public order".

NEWSIN brief

Thailand extends emergency decree

REUTERS, Bangkok

Thailand yesterday extended an emergency decree until the end of July in a bid to avoid the risk of a second wave of the coronavirus, an official said, as the country was poised to reopen bars and allow some foreigners into the country. The emergency decree gives the government a range of additional powers including to deploy officials to investigate venues, bring in curfews, restrict gatherings and control travel.

S Korean birth rate world's lowest

REUTERS, Seoul

South Korea has the world's lowest birth rate, according to a United Nations report released yesterday. The annual report by the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) found the fertility rate per woman in South Korea was only 1.1, the lowest among 201 countries surveyed. Other countries with a low birth rate included Bosnia and Herzegovina and Singapore at 1.2, and Cyprus, Greece, Italy and Portugal at 1.3.

Taliban, Pompeo discuss peace in call

REUTERS, Kabul

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has spoken with the Taliban's chief negotiator amid controversy in Washington over reports that President Donald Trump knew Russia had paid the Taliban bounties to kill US troops. Pompeo and Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar held a video conference late on Monday in which Pompeo pressed the armed group to reduce violence in Afghanistan and discussed ways of moving a peace deal signed between the parties in February forward.

CHILD MARRIAGE AND FGM

UN: Covid-19 puts millions more at risk

REUTERS, London

The coronavirus pandemic is reversing progress on ending child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM), jeopardising the futures of millions of girls, a senior UN official said yesterday.

"The pandemic both makes our job harder and more urgent as so many more girls are now at risk," said Natalia Kanem, head of the United Nations' sexual and reproductive health agency, UNFPA.

An additional 13 million girls could be married off and two million more could undergo FGM in the next decade, beyond what would have been expected, as COVID-19 disrupts global efforts to end both practices, UNFPA said.

Deepening poverty caused by the crisis may also push more parents to get daughters married early.

Kanem spoke as UNFPA launched a major report on the "silent and endemic crisis" of harmful practices, ranging from breast ironing to virginity testing.

"When so many girls and women are unwanted, cut, erased, given, traded and sold, our common future is undermined. We should all be outraged," she told a news conference.

More than 140 million females are "missing" in the world today, mostly in China and India, due to pre-natal sex selection or parents neglecting baby girls so badly that they die, UNFPA said.

Some 33,000 girls are forced into early marriage every day, the report added, and an estimated 4.1 million are at risk of FGM this year.



A woman smiles in a rice paddy field during "National Paddy Day", which marks the start of the annual rice planting season, in Tokha village on the outskirts of Kathmandu, on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP

Nepal families skip meals as pandemic hits remittances

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepali housewife Shiba Kala Limbu grimaced as she recalled how she went hungry in order to feed her five-year-old daughter after the coronavirus pandemic cost her husband his job as a mason in the Gulf state of Qatar. The 25-year-old said she had no money for rent after the payments from her husband, Ram Kumar, stopped.

"It is painful," she said, as she peeled potatoes in a dimly lit kitchen that doubles as her bedroom in the Baniyatar locality of the Nepali capital. "I skipped several evening meals to save whatever little food I had for my daughter."

The spread of the deadly respiratory disease caused by the virus has choked economies worldwide and pitched millions of migrant workers out of jobs, leaving them unable to send money home.

More than 56 percent of Nepal's estimated 5.4 million households receive remittances that are a vital lifeline for families that have no other source of income, official figures show.



Remittances totalled \$8.1 billion last year, or more than a quarter of Nepal's gross domestic product, but are likely to drop 14% in 2020 because of the global recession caused by the virus, as well as a fall in oil prices, the World Bank says.

Millions of Nepali migrants work in the oil-rich Gulf countries and Malaysia.

Remittances are crucial for lower-middle-class families that have moved to city centres and rely on them to pay for rent, groceries, school fees and utilities, said analyst

Ganesh Gurung.

"Without remittances these families will get poorer and crimes like human trafficking and prostitution could rise," said Gurung, an expert on migrant issues at the Nepal Institute of Development Studies think tank.

In the southwestern town of Gajedah, Radha Marasini said her husband, Indra Mani, lost his job as a security guard at a textile factory in India's northern city of Ludhiana after the outbreak.

As her income dried up, the 43-year-old had no option but to turn to a local lender and pay crippling interest rates to ensure she and her 15-year-old son can survive.

"If the corona (virus) situation does not improve, we'll have to eat only one meal a day," Marasini said. The virus has caused 13,248 infections and 29 deaths in Nepal.

Some migrants, like Limbu's husband Ram Kumar, are staying overseas despite the loss of their jobs, in hopes the situation will improve and they can resume work.

BELGIUM'S COLONIAL PAST IN CONGO

King expresses deepest regret

REUTERS, Brussels

Belgium's King Philippe expressed deep regret yesterday for the "suffering and humiliation" inflicted on the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) during its 75-year period under Belgian rule.

It is the first such expression of regret for Belgium's colonial past by a reigning monarch, the royal palace said.

It came in a letter to DRC president Felix Tshisekedi to mark the 60th anniversary of independence.

"I want to express my deepest regret for these past injuries, the pain of which is regularly revived by the discrimination that is still all too present in our societies," said the letter, which was seen by Reuters.

The DRC achieved independence in 1960 after the Central African country had been a Belgian colony for 52 years. Millions of Congolese are estimated to have died between 1885 and 1908 after King Leopold II declared it his personal property.

During Leopold's rule "acts of cruelty were committed, while the subsequent colonial period "caused suffering and humiliation", Philippe said.

Statues of Leopold have been defaced or removed in Belgium recently.

Philippe pledged to "continue to fight every form of racism" and welcomed parliament's move to launch a reconciliation commission to address racism and the country's colonial past. This process of reflection could help Belgians "finally make peace with our memories", he said.

Singapore doesn't need another Lee

Says PM's brother as country heads for polls

REUTERS, Singapore

The Singapore prime minister's estranged brother yesterday said he will not contest the July 10 election as the city-state "does not need another Lee".

Lee Hsien Yang, who has been embroiled in a bitter family dispute with Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, last week joined the opposition to the party their father, Lee Kuan Yew, led through the city-state's independence and rise as a nation.

He has made multiple criticisms of the government in recent weeks, including its decision to hold the vote during the coronavirus pandemic, but his emergence was seen as unlikely to challenge the People's Action Party's tight grip on power.

"I have chosen not to stand for political office because I believe Singapore does not need another Lee," Lee Hsien Yang said in a Facebook post on Tuesday, the deadline for candidates to register their intent to stand in the election.

Lee Hsien Yang was earlier seen with members of his new Progress Singapore Party near the nomination centre for a seat which his father held for 60 years until his death in 2015.

The PAP - which has ruled unbroken since independence in 1965 currently holds all but six of parliament's 89 seats and has never seen its vote drop below 60%.

Lee Hsien Yang, 62, was a senior business executive who had largely stayed out of the public eye before his father's death in 2015 sparked a feud with his brother over their family home.

"It would have been the most natural thing for me to have entered political office. But political leadership in Singapore needs to be much more than about one family or one man," Lee Hsien Yang said in his Facebook post.