Asian markets track Wall St record, bankers meeting in focus

AFP, *Hong Kong*

Asian markets rose Monday, tracking another record on Wall Street as the US appeared to tone down its anti-China rhetoric, while traders turn their attention to a meeting of central bankers later in the week.

Hong Kong led the gains, boosted by tech giant Tencent after reports said the White House is looking to reassure US firms they can still do business with the company's WeChat messaging app in China, despite a crackdown on the service at home.

Donald Trump's decision this month to impose sweeping restrictions against WeChat and TikTok, citing security concerns, ramped up tensions between the two superpowers that have been strained by various issues including coronavirus and Hong Kong.

The reports helped push the tech-heavy Nasdaq to yet another record on Friday, while the broader S&P 500 also reached a new high.

Hong Kong led gains across Asia, rallying 1.7 percent with traders also cheered by a pledge from China's banking regulator that it would continue to back the city as a financial hub, after concerns were raised following the imposition of a new security law last month.

Shanghai put on 0.2 percent and Tokyo added 0.3 percent. Seoul piled on more than one percent while Sydney and Taipei each gained 0.3 percent. Mumbai, Singapore, Wellington and Bangkok were also in positive territory.

London, Paris and Frankfurt were all more than one percent higher.

Buying was also boosted by news that Trump had expanded the use of a coronavirus treatment using plasma from people who had recovered from the disease. "Not the Covid-19 cure all the world is hoping for, but it is another positive step to help patient recovery time and get people back on their feet quicker," said AxiCorp's Stephen Innes.

AP

A man walks past an electronic stock board showing Japan's Nikkei 225 index at a securities firm in Tokyo Monday, Aug. 24, 2020. Asian stock markets rose Monday after Wall Street hit a new high despite lingering unease about a possible second wave of coronavirus infections.

Investors will also be keeping an eye on this week's virtual gathering of central bankers, hoping for some guidance on their plans for monetary policy after they provided a wall of cash to support the global economy -- and stock markets -- during the crisis.

The main attraction is a speech by Federal Reserve chief Jerome Powell that is slated to take place on Thursday. "More clarity will no doubt be sought via this week's Jackson Hole symposium," said Ben Emons, of Medley Global Advisors.

"Meanwhile, we expect the enforcement meeting to proceed smoothly within the next several weeks," he said in reference to a review of the China-US trade pact.

Traders are also keeping tabs on Washington, where US lawmakers are struggling to reach an agreement on a fresh stimulus for the US economy.

"With the Republican party set to focus on their own national convention this week, following on from the Democrat convention last week, pressure is building on Democrat House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to come to an accommodation with Republicans on a new plan," said Michael Hewson at CMC Markets.

Oil gains on storm-hit US output and Covid-19 treatment hopes

REUTERS, *London*

Crude oil prices rose on Monday as storms closed in on the Gulf of Mexico, shutting more than half its oil production, and on signs of progress in development of a Covid-19 treatment.

Brent crude LCOc1 was up 33 cents, or 0.7%, at $44.68 a barrel by 1033 GMT. U.S. West Texas Intermediate crude CLc1 rose 32 cents, or 0.8%, to $42.66.

"Prices are taking their cues from Mother Nature this morning as two storms bear down on the Gulf of Mexico. Half of the region's production has been shut down, though gains will be limited by the threat of a second prolonged COVID wave," said Stephen Brennock of oil broker PVM.

Energy companies shut more than 1 million barrels per day (bpd) of offshore crude oil production in the U.S. Gulf of Mexico because of the twin threat from Hurricane Marco and Tropical Storm Laura. Workers have been evacuated from more than 100 production platforms.

"While there is a focus on oil production at the moment, we will need to keep an eye on refining activity, which is vulnerable to flooding. The U.S. Gulf is a key refining hub," said Warren Patterson, ING's head of commodities strategy.

Also supporting prices was a report by the Financial Times that U.S. President Donald Trump is considering fast-tracking an experimental COVID-19 vaccine being developed by AstraZeneca and Oxford University.

REUTERS/FILE

An oil worker walks towards a drill rig after placing ground-monitoring equipment in the vicinity of the underground horizontal drill in Loving County, Texas, US.

On Sunday Trump also hailed FDA authorization of a coronavirus treatment that uses blood plasma from recovered patients, a day after he accused the agency of impeding the rollout of vaccines and therapeutics for political reasons.

Oil price gains were kept in check, however, by an increase in the U.S. oil and natural rig count for the first time since March, with the addition of the most oil rigs in seven months as shale producers resume drilling.

Walk from home: HK tour company moves online to survive pandemic

REUTERS, *Hong Kong*

A Hong Kong tourism company has moved its walking tours online to reach a travel-starved audience unable to explore new places due to coronavirus restrictions.

The company, Walk in Hong Kong, runs free online tours in Cantonese focussed on local history and culture, with help from government subsidies and private donations. While bookings for its regular in-person tours typically took a week to fill, one recent virtual tour filled 70 spots overnight.

It now plans to run such tours in English for an overseas audience on a permanent basis. It expects to start charging around HK$100 ($13) per person from next month.

The tours are filmed with a phone and a gimbal and are interactive, with specialist guests such as architects available to answer questions. Eight people are working in two teams, one on the ground, the other interacting with the audience from a studio in between tour stops.

"We are thinking about turning it into a program that appeals to overseas guests, for example talking about Hong Kong's history and Hong Kong's current events, to explain what is happening to the city," said managing director Olivia Tang.

"We can have hundreds of people from all around the world attend at the same time." Tourism in Hong Kong has been crippled in the past year first by pro-democracy protests, then by the pandemic. Many countries have also issued travel advisories after Beijing introduced a sweeping national security law last month that tightens the central government's grip on China's freest city.

REUTERS

Paul Chan, tour guide and CEO of Walk in Hong Kong, and Charles Lai, architect, speak during a live streamed virtual tour, following the Covid-19 outbreak in Hong Kong.

Tourist arrivals plummeted 99.7% in June from a year earlier to 14,606.

Julianne Chan, 27, joined a recent tour about architecture in Kennedy Town, the neighbourhood where she grew up, after having to cancel a trip to London due to COVID-19.

"During the pandemic ...there's not a lot you can do," she said.

"With these constraints, I would still go on a virtual tour, but if I can choose, I would always opt for just going abroad myself and seeing with my own eyes."

Tesco to create 16,000 more permanent jobs in online boom

REUTERS

Britain's largest supermarket Tesco on Monday said it will create an additional 16,000 permanent jobs to support the exceptional growth in its online business and may even increase the number of roles as the lockdown boosted its sales.

"The supermarket expects the majority of these roles to be filled by colleagues who joined on a temporary basis at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, but who now want to stay with the business permanently," the company said.

Tesco said the roles will include 10,000 pickers to assemble customer orders and 3,000 drivers to deliver them, along with a variety of other roles in stores and distribution centres.

At a time when companies including high-street retailers, hotels and airlines have laid off tens of thousands of workers to cut costs, UK supermarkets have had to take on additional staff to deal with more demand for deliveries and groceries at home.