

NEWS IN BRIEF

Brazil is 'broke': president

With state subsidies to fight poverty now ended, Brazil's far-right President Jair Bolsonaro on Tuesday said his country is "broke" and he is unable to do anything about it, attributing the crisis to "the press-fueled" coronavirus. "Brazil is broke, boss, I cannot do anything," the former army officer said, responding to one of the supporters who greeted him in front of his official residence in the capital Brasilia. The reform he was referring to was a campaign promise for a raise in the level of tax-exempt income. Bolsonaro attributes the country's economic collapse to lockdown measures pushed by state governors to combat the coronavirus pandemic.

Bush to attend Biden inauguration

Republican former US president George W Bush will attend the inauguration of Democrats Joe Biden and Kamala Harris in Washington on January 20, his chief of staff said Tuesday. "President and Mrs. Bush look forward to returning to the Capitol for the swearing in of President Biden and Vice President Harris," Freddy Ford tweeted. "Witnessing the peaceful transfer of power is a hallmark of our democracy that never gets old," he added, in a seeming jab at President Donald Trump who refuses to concede defeat and has not confirmed if he will attend Biden's inauguration.

Assange denied bail



WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange was denied bail yesterday because a judge said there is a risk he may abscond while the United States tries to secure his extradition from Britain. Assange has spent more than eight years either holed up in the London's Ecuadorian embassy or in jail. But Assange on Monday won an attempt to stop his extradition to the United States to face 18 criminal charges of breaking an espionage law and conspiring to hack government computers. He had then asked to be bailed.

Latvia health minister fired over vaccine policy

Latvia's prime minister on Tuesday fired his health minister in a row over coronavirus vaccination policy, straining ties within the governing coalition. Krisjanis Karins said the Baltic state was "struggling with the consequences of not having a clear and comprehensible plan of action". Latvia has focused its vaccination plan mainly on the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, which has so far not been authorised in the European Union. Health Minister Ilze Vinkelė accepted the prime minister's request for her to step down but complained that she has been made a scapegoat for government's failure.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS



US President Donald Trump's supporters gather for a rally challenging the results of the 2020 US Presidential election on the Ellipse outside of the White House yesterday in Washington, DC. Joe Biden's Democratic Party took a giant step yesterday towards seizing control of the US Senate as they won the first of two Georgia run-offs, hours before Congress was set to certify the president-elect's victory over Donald Trump.

PHOTO: REUTERS

EU okays Moderna vaccine

US logs record daily death toll; WHO backs spaced-out Covid jabs

AGENCIES

The EU's drug regulator approved the Moderna coronavirus jab yesterday, the bloc's second and a shot in the arm for Europe's slow-moving vaccine roll-out.

In a long-awaited decision, the Amsterdam-based European Medicines Agency (EMA) gave the green light for the US firm's vaccine for use on people over 18.

Criticism has mounted of the EU's sluggish start to its vaccination campaign since the first vaccine, by Pfizer-BioNTech, was authorised in late December.

"This vaccine provides us with another tool to overcome the current emergency," EMA Executive Director Emer Cooke said in a statement.

The EMA's one-year conditional marketing authorisation is for two injections of the Moderna vaccine into the arm, 28 days apart. Moderna's jab was found to be 94.1 percent effective in preventing Covid-19 compared to a placebo in a clinical trial of 30,400



people, performing slightly better in younger adults compared to the elderly.

The Covid-19 crisis has shown no signs of slowing, with known infections nearing 86 million worldwide and more than 1.8 million deaths, even as many nations ramp up their vaccination rollouts.

England began its third national lockdown Tuesday. Denmark and Germany also extended and increased coronavirus measures on Tuesday.

Britain and Denmark have said they will wait for longer than the recommended 21-28 days between jabs so they can focus on giving more

people their first dose -- a move that has divided specialists.

But World Health Organization experts on Tuesday gave cautious backing "in exceptional circumstances" to delaying the second doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine.

In China, schools were shut and travel was restricted in the northern city of Shijiazhuang -- home to around 11 million people -- as authorities moved to snuff out a cluster after dozens were infected.

The United States broke its own record for the number of daily deaths from Covid-19 yet again Tuesday, recording 3,936 fatalities in 24 hours, according to a tally kept by Johns Hopkins University.

The world's worst-hit nation is ultimately counting on its vaccination campaign, which began mid-December, to end the crisis. But less than two percent of the population has so far been covered, with 4.8 million people having received the first of two doses.

AFP, New Delhi

India will hold a mass nationwide online "cow science" exam next month, in the latest push by the Hindu nationalist government to promote and protect the sacred animal, officials said yesterday.

The hour-long test on February 25, open to children and adults as well as foreigners, comprises 100 multiple-choice questions in Hindi, English and 12 regional languages.

The aim is to assess the public's knowledge and "sensitise and educate" them, according to the RKA cow protection agency created by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration.

"Certificates will be given to all. Successful meritorious candidates will be given prizes and certificates," the Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry and Dairying said.

"The cow is full of science and economics. People are not aware of the true economic and scientific value of the animal," RKA chief Vallabhbaai Kathirra said.

Accompanying study material released by the RKA includes information on different breeds of cow as well as the theory that slaughtering animals causes earthquakes.

Many from India's overwhelming Hindu majority consider cows sacred but under Modi's rule the animal has increasingly become a political and sectarian flashpoint. His government has made cows a top priority and invested millions of dollars in programmes to protect the animal and research the uses for bovine dung and urine.

Cow slaughter and eating beef has become illegal in many parts of the culturally diverse and officially secular country, while sentences elsewhere have increased.

China's crackdown on Hong Kong escalates

At least 53 opposition figures arrested for trying to 'overthrow' govt

AFP, Hong Kong

China's crackdown in Hong Kong escalated dramatically yesterday with police arresting more than 50 opposition figures in their largest operation since a draconian security law was imposed on the financial hub.

The sweep is the latest salvo in Beijing's battle to stamp out dissent in the semi-autonomous city after millions hit the streets in 2019 with huge and sometimes violent democracy protests.

Police confirmed 53 people -- including a US citizen -- were arrested for "subversion" in an early morning operation that involved about 1,000 officers. The charges were sparked by an attempt by opposition groups last year to win a majority in the city's partially-elected legislature.

Hong Kong's security chief John Lee described the arrests as "necessary" and aimed at a group of people who tried to "sink Hong Kong into an abyss" and "overthrow the government".

Beijing's Liaison Office in Hong Kong said those facing prosecution



"strategically organised or implemented a plan to paralyse the government".

But the operation sparked a rebuke from Antony Blinken, US President-elect Joe Biden's pick for secretary of state, who said authorities were launching "an assault on those bravely advocating for universal rights".

The EU yesterday called for the release of the opposition figures.

"We are currently analysing the situation to see how we might need to react. There are other possibilities open to us, sanctions for example," European Commission spokesman Peter Stano told journalists.

British Foreign Secretary Dominic

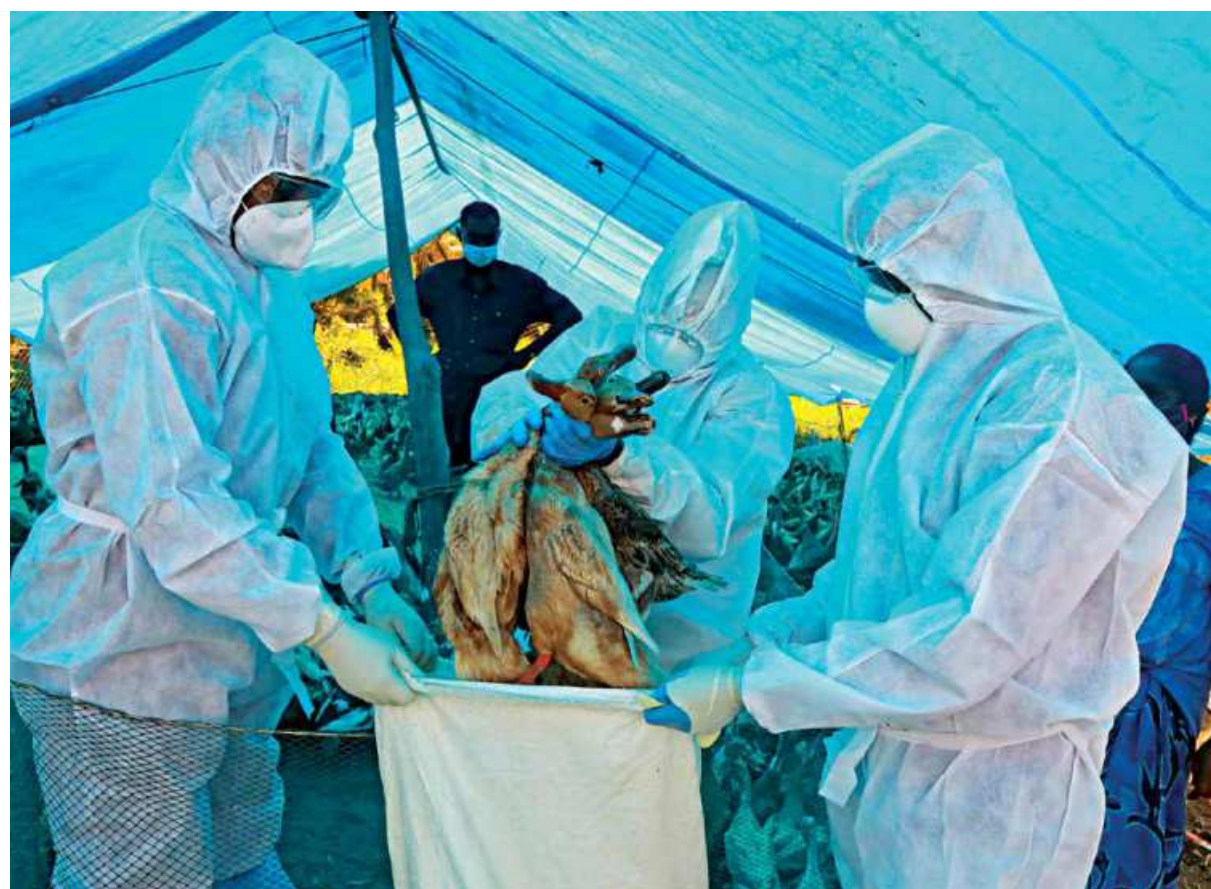
Raab too criticised the arrests.

"The mass arrest of politicians and activists in Hong Kong is a grievous attack on Hong Kong's rights and freedoms as protected under the Joint Declaration," he said, referring to the UK's 1984 agreement with Beijing that paved the way for the territory's return to Chinese rule.

Those detained represented a broad cross-section of Hong Kong's opposition, from veteran former pro-democracy lawmakers such as James To, Andrew Wan to a host of younger activists.

National security police also searched a law firm known for taking on human rights cases. The police operation also involved the media. Three local news outlets -- Stand News, Apple Daily and Inmediak -- said national security police visited to request documents.

Some of the remaining members of Hong Kong's rapidly diminishing pro-democracy bloc gathered for a press conference on Wednesday afternoon, raising fists and shouting "Free all political prisoners!"



Health workers in protective suits cull ducks after the H5N8 bird flu strain was detected, in Karuvatta of Alapuzha district some 90 kms from Kochi, India yesterday. Tens of thousands of poultry will be slaughtered in India after an outbreak of deadly avian influenza was found to have killed scores of birds across the country.

PHOTO: AFP



Family members and protesters stage a demonstration against the killing of miners of a Shia Hazara community at the eastern bypass on the outskirts of Quetta, yesterday. Hundreds of mourners in Pakistan protested yesterday for a fourth day alongside the bodies of the miners killed in a brutal attack claimed by the Islamic State group, as officials urged them to bury their dead.

PHOTO: AFP

URANIUM ENRICHMENT DRIVE

Iran's move carries 'significant' risks

Say Germany, France, Britain

AFP, Berlin

Germany, France and Britain yesterday said they were "deeply concerned" about Iran's move to step up its uranium enrichment, warning of "very significant" risks.

Tehran on Tuesday said it was now refining uranium to 20 percent purity, the biggest break yet from its commitments under the 2015 nuclear deal struck with world powers.

"This action, which has no credible civil justification and carries very significant proliferation-related risks, is in clear violation of Iran's commitments" under the pact, the European trio said in a statement.

Iran's increased uranium enrichment has triggered international concern because it is seen as a significant step towards the 90 percent level required for a nuclear weapon.

The landmark 2015 deal agreed between Iran and the United States, China, Russia, Britain, France and Germany has been fraying since President Donald Trump withdrew from it in 2018 and reimposed harsh sanctions.

The Iranian government has signalled a readiness to engage with US President-elect Joe Biden, who has expressed willingness to return to diplomacy with Tehran.

Last five years 'worst of the worst' for North Korea

Kim Jong Un admits failures in 'almost all areas'

AGENCIES

North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un admitted the country's economic development plan had fallen short in "almost all areas" as he opened a rare congress of the ruling Workers' Party, state media reported yesterday.

Kim called the past five years "unprecedented" and the "worst of the worst" time for the country.

"The surest and fastest way to tackle the current multiple challenges facing us is to make every possible effort to strengthen our own power and our own self-reliant capacity," he was quoted by Yonhap news agency as saying.

The gathering is the first of its kind in five years, only the eighth in the nuclear-armed country's history and comes weeks before US President-elect Joe Biden takes office.

The congress opened on Tuesday in the capital, the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported.

Pictures in the Rodong Sinmun ruling party newspaper showed 7,000 delegates

and attendees packed into the cavernous hall, none of them wearing masks. Pyongyang insists that it has not had a single case of the disease -- observers doubt the claim -- but summer floods put further strain on its finances.

On the first day of his work review, Kim said the results of the last five-year economic development strategy "fell extremely short of our goals in almost all areas", KCNA reported. The plan was quietly scrapped ahead of schedule last year.

The congress is the top meeting of the ruling party -- a grand political set-piece that reinforces the regime's authority and is closely followed by analysts for signs of policy shifts or changes in its top ranks.

Kim's sister and key adviser Kim Yo Jong was among the officials elected to the presidium of the congress, in a sign of her increasing standing.

The last congress in 2016 -- the first in almost 40 years -- cemented Kim's status as supreme leader and the inheritor of his family's dynastic rule, which spans 70 years.