

PROTESTS BACKING JAILED NAVALNY

Police arrest over 1,000 in Russia

REUTERS, Moscow

Police detained over 1,000 people across Russia yesterday and used force to break up rallies around the country as tens of thousands of protesters demanded the release of Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny, whose wife was among those detained.

Navalny had called on his supporters to protest after being arrested last weekend as he returned to Russia from Germany for the first time since being poisoned with a nerve agent he says was applied to his underpants by state security agents in August.

The authorities had warned people to stay away from yesterday's protests, saying they risked catching Covid-19 as well as prosecution and possible jail time for attending an unauthorised event. But protesters defied the ban and bitter cold, and turned out in force.

In central Moscow, where Reuters reporters estimated at least 40,000 people had gathered in one of the biggest unauthorised rallies for years, police were seen roughly detaining people, bundling them into nearby vans. The authorities said just some 4,000 people had shown up.

Navalny's wife Yulia said on social media she had been detained at the rally. Some of Navalny's political allies were detained in the days before the protest; others on the day itself.

The OVD-Info protest monitor group said that at least 1,090 people had been detained across Russia. It reported arrests at rallies in nearly 70 towns and cities.

Navalny is in a Moscow prison pending the outcome of four legal matters he describes as trumped up. He accuses President Vladimir Putin of ordering his attempted murder. Putin has dismissed that, alleging Navalny is part of a US-backed dirty tricks campaign to discredit him.



A woman stands in front of law enforcement officers during a rally in support of jailed Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny in Moscow, yesterday. Inset, A protester is being detained. PHOTO: REUTERS

NEWS IN BRIEF

Sorcery couldn't save Lanka health minister

Sri Lanka's health minister, who publicly endorsed sorcery and magic potions to stop surging coronavirus infections in the island, has tested positive and will self-isolate, officials said yesterday. Pavithra Wanniarachchi had publicly consumed and endorsed a magic potion, later revealed to contain honey and nutmeg, manufactured by a sorcerer who claimed it worked as a life-long inoculation against the virus. She also poured a pot of "blessed" water into a river in November after a self-styled godman told her that it would end the pandemic. The island nation of 21 million on Friday approved the emergency use of the vaccine developed by AstraZeneca and Oxford University.

US, Mexico, Guatemala bar migrant caravans, citing Covid

The United States, Mexico and Guatemala agreed Friday to bar migrant caravans from passing through their territories due to the Covid pandemic, days after one from Honduras was violently broken up in Guatemala. US Ambassador to Guatemala William Popp stressed that any migrants who cross the US border in an irregular manner will be returned home immediately, citing national health security. His comments came after a meeting with Guatemalan Foreign Minister Pedro Brolo and Mexican Ambassador to Guatemala Romeo Ruiz. The deal came after Guatemalan authorities on Monday broke up the latest caravan of Honduran migrants, who set out hoping for a more welcoming US policy on immigration following President Joe Biden's arrival in office. More than a dozen caravans, some with thousands of migrants, have set off from Honduras since October 2018, aiming to walk to a better life in the United States.

Biden calls Trudeau



In his first call to a foreign leader as US President, Joe Biden spoke with Canadian counterpart Justin Trudeau Friday on a number of topics and made plans to continue the conversation next month, Ottawa and Washington said in separate statements. During the conversation, which Canada said lasted approximately 30 minutes, the two leaders covered everything from the coronavirus pandemic to environmental protections. In a similar call Friday, Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador confirmed on Twitter that he and Biden had discussed topics ranging from Covid-19 to migration. According to both countries, the leaders discussed Biden's decision to cancel the permit for the Keystone XL pipeline.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

New Covid variant may carry higher risk of death

Warns UK PM as concern grow over the new strains

REUTERS, London

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said on Friday the new English variant of Covid-19 may be associated with a higher level of mortality although he said evidence showed that both vaccines being used in the country are effective against it.

Johnson said that the impact of the new variant, which is already known to be more transmissible, was putting the health service under "intense pressure".

"We've been informed today that in addition to spreading more quickly, it also now appears that there is some evidence that the new variant - the variant that was first discovered in London and the southeast (of England) - may be associated with a higher degree of mortality," he told a news briefing.

Johnson said however that all



the current evidence showed both vaccines remained effective against old and new variants.

Chief Scientific Adviser Patrick Vallance said the evidence about mortality levels was "not yet strong", and came from a "series of different bits of information", stressing there was great uncertainty around the data.

He said that once people reached

hospital, there was no greater risk, but there were signs that people who had the UK variant were at more risk overall.

"There's no real evidence of an increase in mortality for those in hospital. However, when data are looked at in terms of those who've been tested positive... there is evidence that there's an increased risk for those who have the new variant, compared to the old virus," he said.

He said that for a man in his sixties, the average risk was that 10 in 1,000 people who got infected would be expected to die, but that this rose to roughly 13 or 14 people in 1,000 with the new variant.

"I want to stress that there's a lot of uncertainty around these numbers and we need more work to get a precise handle on it," he said.

US to review US-Taliban troops withdrawal deal

AFP, Washington

The Biden administration said it will review a landmark US deal with the Taliban, focusing on whether the insurgent group has reduced attacks in Afghanistan, in keeping with its side of the agreement.

Washington struck a deal with the Taliban in Qatar last year, to begin withdrawing its troops in return for security guarantees from the militants and a commitment to kickstart peace talks with the Afghan government.

But violence across Afghanistan has surged despite the two sides engaging in those talks since September.

President Joe Biden's newly appointed national security advisor, Jake Sullivan, spoke with his Afghan counterpart Hamdullah Mohib and "made clear the United States' intention to review" the deal, said National Security Council spokeswoman Emily Horne late Friday.

Specifically, Washington wants to check that the Taliban is "living up to its commitments to cut ties with terrorist groups, to reduce violence in Afghanistan, and to engage in meaningful negotiations with the Afghan government and other stakeholders," her statement continued.

It added that Sullivan "underscored that the US will support the peace process with a robust and regional diplomatic effort, which will aim to help the two sides achieve a durable and just political settlement and permanent ceasefire." Sullivan also discussed the United States' support for protecting recent progress made on women and minority groups' rights as part of the peace process.

Washington's move was met with a sigh of relief from officials in Kabul after months of speculation over new administration Afghan policy.

Turn back time?

Study hints at way to halt decay as we age

AFP, Tokyo

The march of time can be unkind to the human body but new research hints at a cause -- and possible solution -- for some of the ailments and decline that often come with age.

Scientists have long known that cognitive decline as we get older and specific age-related diseases are linked to inflammation, but they are still uncovering precisely why and how this is the case.

Research published in the journal Nature pinpoints the role of a messenger hormone found in much higher levels in older people and mice than their younger counterparts.

When the hormone was blocked in older mice, they were able to perform as well as more youthful rodents in tests of their memory and navigation.

The researchers found that higher levels of the hormone affected the metabolism of immune cells called macrophages, prompting them to store energy rather than consume it. That effectively starved the cells, sending them into a damaging inflammatory hyperdrive associated with age-related cognitive decline and several age-related diseases.

The hormone, prostaglandin E2 (PGE2), "is a major regulator of all types of inflammation, both good and bad, and its effect depends on the receptor that is activated," the study's senior author Katrin Andersson told AFP. "In this study, we identified the EP2 receptor... as the receptor that leads to energy depletion and maladaptive inflammation," added Andersson.

They administered to mice two experimental compounds that can block the EP2 receptor and found it reversed the metabolic problems -- restoring their more youthful behaviour and preventing destructive inflammatory activity.



Indian dancers perform during the full dress rehearsal for the Republic Day parade in New Delhi, India, yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

Small farmers 'need more aid to ward off famines'

Says UN ahead of climate adaptation summit

AFP, Paris

Climate aid to millions of small farmers around the world must "substantially increase" to ward off hunger and instability, a United Nations body warned yesterday.

Small farmers "do little to cause climate change, but suffer the most from its impacts," Gilbert F Houngbo, President of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) said in a statement.

"If investments... do not substantially increase, we risk widespread hunger and global instability," IFAD added.

Houngbo said small farmers' "increasingly common crop failures and livestock deaths put our entire food system at risk", warning that "hunger, poverty and migration will become even more widespread" without increased aid.

The UN body's warning comes ahead of a climate adaptation summit on

January 25 and 26 in the Netherlands.

At the gathering, IFAD plans to launch a new \$500-million fund dubbed ASAP+ "to reduce climate change threats to food security, lower greenhouse gases and help more than 10 million people adapt to weather changes".

Austria, Germany, Ireland and Qatar have already said they will contribute.

IFAD-funded research forecasts a potential fall in production of staples like beans, maize, and cassava of between 50 and 90 percent by 2050 across much of sub-Saharan Africa due to climate change, "which would result in substantial increases in hunger and poverty".

"Climate change could push more than 140 million people to migrate" over the same period, the studies found.

IFAD's earlier ASAP programme has already distributed \$300 million to more than five million farmers in 41 countries. But the body notes that only 1.7 percent of global climate finance goes to small-scale farmers in developing countries.

Lloyd Austin becomes first Black chief of Pentagon

Biden orders assessment of domestic extremism risk

AGENCIES

The US Senate confirmed retired general Lloyd Austin as secretary of defense Friday, the second cabinet nominee of new President Joe Biden to gain approval and the first African American to lead the Pentagon.

Austin sailed through with overwhelming support from both Biden's Democrats and opposition Republicans, who voted 93-2 in his favor.

The retired four-star general will be the first African American to lead the Department of Defense, and takes on the job as the Pentagon sees the need for greater efforts to root out racism in the ranks and give more opportunities for leadership positions to minorities.

Biden picked Austin, and the Senate endorsed him, despite a law that says the US military must be led by a civilian or, if a former military official, someone who has been out of the service at least seven years.

The requirement is to ensure civilian control of the military. That meant both houses of Congress had to grant a waiver

for Austin, who retired in 2016.

Austin, a West Point graduate who served four decades in the military, was commander of US forces in Iraq and then head of the US Central Command covering the Middle East, from 2010 to 2016.

He honed in on two urgent issues facing the US military in his confirmation hearing on Tuesday.

He singled out China as the country's most potent adversary. He also pledged to tackle extremists in the forces, after some members of the military took part in the January 6 attack on the US Capitol by supporters of then-president Donald Trump.

Biden orders assessment of domestic extremism risk, White House says

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On Friday, the White House said Biden has directed his administration to conduct a full assessment of the risk of domestic terrorism. The assessment will be carried out by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence in coordination with the FBI and Department of Homeland Security, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said.



A young poet captivates US

AFP, Washington

Amanda Gorman, the young Black poet who performed at President Joe Biden's inaugural, has become an overnight star with her works shooting to the top of Amazon bestseller lists ahead of their publication.

Gorman, 22, recited "The Hill We Climb" at the inaugural, a poem inspired by the US Capitol attack touching on how democracy "can never be permanently defeated."

She is the youngest poet ever to recite at a presidential inauguration, a role first given to Robert Frost by John F. Kennedy in 1961.

The Harvard University graduate was invited to participate after First Lady Jill Biden saw one of her readings.

A collection of Gorman's poems to be published in September was number one on the Amazon bestseller list on Friday followed by a children's book, "Change Sings: A Children's Anthem," also to be released in September.

A hardcover copy of her inaugural poem to be released next month is number three on the list.

Gorman's works knocked

former president Barack Obama's autobiography, "A Promised Land," down to the number five position.

America's first Black president was one of the many Americans left impressed by Gorman.

"On a day for the history books, @TheAmandaGorman delivered a poem



that more than met the moment," Obama tweeted, before quoting the closing line of Gorman's inaugural poem.

"Young people like her are proof that 'there is always light, if only we're brave enough to see it; if only we're brave enough to be it,'" Obama said.

Talk show host Oprah Winfrey, former Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai

were among those praising the young poet.

She gained two million followers on Instagram in a day and a million on Twitter. Her poem was set to music by Rostam Batmanglij.

Originally from Los Angeles, raised by a single mother, Gorman had a speech impediment as a child -- like the 46th president -- and turned to writing.

She won her first poetry prize at 16 years old and went on to study sociology at Harvard.

She has previously written about the struggle for racial equality and the #MeToo movement against sexual assault.

Gorman was forced to extensively revise her poem at the last minute after supporters of president Donald Trump stormed the US Capitol on January 6 in a bid to undo Biden's election victory.

"We've seen a force that would shatter our nation rather than share it / Would destroy our country if it meant delaying democracy," she recited.

"And this effort very nearly succeeded / But while democracy can be periodically delayed, / It can never be permanently defeated."