

NEWS IN brief

**Palestinian rivals to respect polls results**

Rival Palestinian factions Fatah and Hamas said Tuesday they had agreed on "mechanisms" for forthcoming elections and to respect their outcome, after years of bitter divisions. In a joint statement on the second day of talks between Palestinian factions in Cairo, they said they had agreed a timeline for the polls and "committed to respecting and accepting their results". The deal provides for an "electoral court" with exclusive jurisdiction over the electoral process and any cases arising from the elections. The parliamentary and presidential polls are set for May 22 and July 31, respectively.

**Magnitude 7.2 quake strikes Loyalty Islands**

An earthquake of magnitude 7.2 struck southeast of Loyalty Islands yesterday, the European Mediterranean Seismological Centre (EMSC) said. The quake's epicentre was 424 km east of Tadiene, New Caledonia, and was at a depth of 10 km, EMSC said. The quake followed at least three other earthquakes in the region with magnitudes ranging from 5.7 to 6.1 in a span of just over an hour. The US Tsunami Warning System said a tsunami watch was in effect for American Samoa and that there was potential for tsunamis in other regions including Vanuatu, Fiji, New Zealand.

**Chinese spacecraft enters Mars orbit**

An uncrewed Chinese spacecraft yesterday successfully entered orbit around Mars after a 6-1/2-month journey from Earth, China's space agency said, in the country's first independent mission to the red planet. In May or June, the Tianwen-1 will attempt to land a capsule carrying a 240-kg rover in a rapid seven-minute descent onto a massive plain in the northern hemisphere of Mars known as Utopia Planitia. If the landing is successful, the solar-powered rover will explore the Martian surface for 90 days, studying its soil and seeking signs of ancient life, including any sub-surface water and ice using a ground-penetrating radar.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS



Medical workers rally against the military coup and to demand the release of elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi, in Yangon, Myanmar, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

**Protest rages on despite crackdown**

Thousands protest for fifth day; West condemns harsh security response

REUTERS

Protesters returned to the streets of Myanmar yesterday despite the shooting of a young woman the previous day, with some deploying humour to emphasise their peaceful opposition to this month's military takeover.

Mya Thwate Thwate Khaing, 19, was the first known serious casualty of the protests and her wounding rallied support for the movement seeking to reverse the Feb. 1 coup and free elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi and her allies from detention.

There were no reports of violence yesterday and in many places



Myanmar cops flash three-fingers salute as they join anti-coup protest in Kayah State, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

protests took on a festive air, with bare-chested body builders, women in ball gowns and wedding dresses, farmers in tractors and people with their pets.

Thousands joined protesters in the main city of Yangon, while in the capital, Naypyitaw, hundreds of government workers marched in support of a growing civil disobedience campaign.

A group of police in Kayah state in the east marched in uniform with a sign that said "We don't want

dictatorship", according to pictures published in media.

The military, which has imposed restrictions on gatherings and a night curfew in the biggest cities, justified its takeover on the grounds of fraud in a Nov. 8 election that Suu Kyi's NLD party won by a landslide. The electoral commission dismissed the army's complaints.

Western countries have condemned the coup but taken little concrete action to press for the restoration of democracy.

The US State Department said it was reviewing assistance to Myanmar to ensure those responsible for the coup faced "significant consequences".

UN human rights investigator Thomas Andrews voiced concern at the use of lethal force. The United Nations main human rights body is set to consider a resolution on Friday that would condemn the coup in Myanmar and demand urgent access, a text shows.

Avinash Paliwal, a senior lecturer at London University's School of Oriental and African Studies, said Myanmar would not be as isolated now as it was in the past, with China, India, Southeast Asian neighbours and Japan unlikely to cut ties.

Underscoring that Asian stance, the prime minister of neighbouring Thailand, Prayuth Chan-ocha, himself a former army chief who seized power in a 2014 coup, said he had received a letter from Myanmar's new junta leader, army chief Min Aung Hlaing, asking for help to support democracy.

**N Korea stole \$300m in crypto to fund nukes: UN**

AFP, Seoul

North Korea has stolen more than \$300 million worth of cryptocurrencies through cyberattacks in recent months to support its banned nuclear and ballistic missile programmes, a confidential UN report said.

Compiled by a panel of experts monitoring sanctions on Pyongyang, the report said the country's "total theft of virtual assets from 2019 to November 2020 is valued at approximately \$316.4 million", citing a UN member state. Financial institutions and exchanges were hacked to generate revenue for Pyongyang's nuclear and missile development, said the report, which was seen by AFP.

The vast majority of the proceeds came from two thefts late last year. The North is known to operate an army of thousands of well-trained hackers who have attacked firms, institutions and researchers in South Korea and elsewhere.

It has also been accused of exploiting its cyber capabilities for financial gain.

The North is under multiple sets of international sanctions over its banned nuclear weapons

and ballistic missile programmes, which have made rapid progress under leader Kim Jong Un.

The UN panel said it was investigating a September 2020 hack against a cryptocurrency exchange that resulted in \$281 million worth of cryptocurrencies being stolen.

A second cyberattack siphoned off \$23 million a month later.

"Preliminary analysis, based on the attack vectors and subsequent efforts to launder the illicit proceeds strongly suggests links to the DPRK," the report said, using the initials for the North's official name.

Pyongyang's cyberwarfare abilities first came to global prominence in 2014 when it was accused of hacking into Sony Pictures Entertainment as revenge for "The Interview", a satirical film that mocked leader Kim.

The North is also blamed for a huge, \$81 million cyber-heist from the Bangladesh Central Bank, as well as the theft of \$60 million from Taiwan's Far Eastern International Bank.

Pyongyang has denied the accusations, saying it has "nothing to do with cyber-attacks".

**'Colonial noose'**

AFP, Wellington

New Zealand's parliament backed down yesterday after ejecting a Maori lawmaker because he refused to wear a tie, allowing him to speak without an accessory he labelled a "colonial noose".

The issue flared on Tuesday when Maori Party co-leader Rawiri Waititi was ejected from the parliamentary debating chamber for not wearing the required attire during question time.

Waititi, who has a full-face "te moko" tattoo and dons a black cowboy hat, argued that he was wearing legitimate Maori business attire -- a traditional pendant.

"This is not about ties, it's about cultural identity," he said as he left.

Indigenous Maori make up about 15 percent of New Zealand's five million population.

Waititi said the tie row showed race relations still needed to improve in the South Pacific nation.

After strictly enforcing the dress code on Tuesday, parliamentary speaker Trevor Mallard took a more relaxed approach when a tie-less Waititi spoke yesterday. Rather than have the Maori leader ejected, Mallard simply let him ask a question unhindered, later saying a permanent rule change was being considered.

Waititi was elected to parliament for the first time last year and in his maiden speech recounted the tale of an ancestor who was wrongly hanged by the British for murder.

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