



Women farmers attend a protest against farm laws on the occasion of International Women's Day at Bahadurgar near Haryana-Delhi border, India yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

UK children go back to school after lockdown

Lowest Covid deaths recorded in Britain since Oct

AFP, London

Children returned to school in England yesterday for the first time since January, as the government begins to ease tough restrictions thanks to a mass vaccination drive against the coronavirus.

Throughout the latest lockdown since the start of the new year, schools have remained open to children of key workers and the most vulnerable.

But all other youngsters have been at home, causing a headache for working parents, and fears about the effect on their learning.

Pupils aged five to 11 went back to the classroom yesterday, with a staggered return over the coming week for secondary school students aged 11 to 18.

The government has been able to plan to ease its Covid-19 restriction measures as around 23 million people in Britain have received at least a first vaccination jab, helping to bring down case numbers and ease pressure on hospitals.

The UK has reported the lowest number of daily coronavirus deaths in nearly five months. A further 82 deaths within 28 days of a positive test, recorded on Sunday, brought the total to 124,501 since the start of the pandemic.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson has outlined plans to lift stay-at-home curbs



in England, hoping a cautious approach will not spark a renewed surge in cases that would force another lockdown.

Britain has suffered more than 123,000 Covid deaths and is banking on its mass vaccination drive to lift all restrictions possibly as early as June.

Under further plans for reopening, the government has said it will ease limits on social interaction outside on March 29, with the reopening of non-essential retail from April 12.

Schoolchildren returned to class after the Christmas break but were sent home again after just one day, to contain a more transmissible virus strain.

"The reopening of schools marks a truly national effort to beat this virus," Johnson said.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Japan minister apologises for bureaucrat's dinner

Japan's internal affairs minister removed a senior bureaucrat from his post and apologised yesterday for what he said could be a breach of the law after an inquiry showed the official attended meals with officials of Nippon Telegraph and Telephone (NTT). Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga's administration has faced public criticism after the Shukan Bunshun magazine said internal affairs officials wined and dined with NTT, as well as Suga's son, an executive at a company that produces television programmes for satellite broadcasters. Yasuhiko Taniwaki, the vice-minister for policy coordination, was transferred to another section after an investigation by the internal affairs ministry confirmed he had attended the dinners, with NTT president Jun Sawada, among others.

More than 100 migrants rescued off Canary Isles

Spain's coast guard rescued 107 migrants from boats off the Canary Islands over the weekend as the migrant surge showed no letup on the



Atlantic archipelago, a spokesman said Sunday. A total of 56 migrants were plucked from two vessels on Saturday. One boat was found off the island of Tenerife carrying 15 men, while a second was intercepted off Gran Canaria carrying another 41 men, all of them from sub-Saharan Africa. On Sunday, the coast guard rescued another 51 people on a boat found off Gran Canaria, he said. On board were 49 men and two women. The shortest route by sea to the Atlantic archipelago is more than 100 kilometres (60 miles) from the Moroccan coast, but the crossing is notoriously dangerous because of strong currents.

Italy arrests Algerian suspected of aiding Paris attackers

Italian police said yesterday they had arrested a 36-year-old Algerian on suspicion of belonging to the Islamic State group and helping the authors of the November 2015 Paris attacks. According to anti-terrorism investigators in the southern city of Bari, the man gave direct support to the Islamist suicide bombers and gunmen, to whom he "guaranteed the availability of forged documents", a police statement said. Some 130 people were killed and 350 wounded in a night of carnage on November 13, 2015, when Islamist suicide bombers and gunmen attacked sites, including the Bataclan concert hall, the Stade de France and the bar Le Carillon.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

'I just didn't want to be alive'

Prince Harry's wife Meghan raises allegations of racism in British royal family during explosive television interview

AFP, New York

Prince Harry's wife Meghan Markle on Sunday said she contemplated taking her own life after joining the royal family, and raised allegations of racism in the monarchy during an explosive television interview.

Explaining the couple's dramatic exit from royal life, Meghan said she was denied help during her mental health crisis, was targeted by lies, and that there was official concern about the skin color of her unborn son.

Meghan, whose father is white and mother is Black, spoke out in an interview with Oprah Winfrey that immediately became one of the most extraordinary chapters in recent royal history and was set to rock the British institution.

"I... just didn't want to be alive anymore. And that was a very clear and real and frightening constant thought," she told



Winfrey, describing the impact of a torrent of vitriol from hostile tabloids and social media.

Asked if she had had suicidal thoughts while pregnant, Meghan replied "Yes. This was very, very clear."

Recalling how she felt at the time, she said that "I'm scared, because this is very real."

Meghan, 39, also told of royal "concerns" about "how dark" her son's skin would be, saying Harry revealed to her official

conversations over Archie's appearance, as well as the security he would be entitled to, ahead of his birth on May 6, 2019.

"In those months when I was pregnant... we have in tandem the conversation of 'he won't be given security, he's not going to be given a title' and also concerns and conversations about how dark his skin might be when he's born," Meghan said.

"That was relayed to me from Harry, those were conversations the family had with him," she said.

After the couple's surprise decision to move to North America, the former television actress has been portrayed in some British newspapers as headstrong, calculating and spoiled, and the couple reckless and selfish for quitting royal life.

The two-hour interview with the queen of US television was the biggest royal tell-all since Harry's mother princess Diana detailed her crumbling marriage to his father Prince Charles in 1995.

EXPLOSIONS AT MILITARY BASE

20 dead, 600 injured in Equatorial Guinea

AFP, Malabo

At least 20 people were killed and hundreds injured after four accidental explosions ripped through a military camp in Equatorial Guinea and obliterated neighbouring residential areas.

Footage broadcast by the TVGE channel showed buildings burned and flattened in a wide radius around the Nkoa Ntoma camp in the economic capital Bata, with a thick plume of black smoke rising into the sky.

Children and adults were seen being pulled from the rubble. There were chaotic scenes at the hospital in Bata, with the wounded lying on the floor awaiting treatment.

The health ministry warned in a tweet that many residents could still be buried under the wreckage.

President Teodoro Obiang Nguema said the accident had occurred after local farmers allowed a fire in the area to burn out of control, setting alight explosives that had been badly stored by soldiers at the military camp.

"The city of Bata has been the victim of an accident caused by the negligence of the unit in charge of storing explosives, dynamite and ammunition at the Nkoa Ntoma military camp," Obiang Nguema said in a statement.

"These caught fire due to stubble-burning by farmers in their fields which ultimately made these depots explode in succession."

The defence ministry put the death toll at at least 20, with some 600 people injured.

The "high calibre" explosives set off by the fire caused "shockwaves" which razed many houses to the ground, the ministry added.

Obiang Nguema issued a plea for international aid.

The disaster comes at an already difficult time for Equatorial Guinea, "due to the economic crisis caused by falling petrol prices, and the Covid-19 pandemic", he said.



A machinery guarded by Israeli forces demolishes an under-construction Palestinian building, in Bani Naim near Hebron in the Israeli-occupied West Bank yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS



Gabriella, an asylum seeking migrant from Honduras, carries her six year old son Diego as they walk through bush after crossing the Rio Grande river into the United States from Mexico in Penitas, Texas, US on Sunday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

'They have thrown us out'

India's evictions of forest dwellers fuel Kashmir fears

AFP, Pahalgam

Ghulam Khatana's family lived half their lives in a simple log hut in Kashmir's forests, until around 200 men brandishing guns and iron rods chased them out of their home and into the blistering cold.

As India steps up its efforts to assert control over the fractious Himalayan region, communities living in remote woodlands say they've been banished from their ancestral homes.

Thousands of apple trees in small forest villages have been chopped down and wooden homes knocked down by police, forest guards and other officials.

"They just ended our traditional way of life. I feel as if I was buried alive," said 30-year-old Khatana in Kashmir's famed Pahalgam tourist region.

"It (the forest) protects us from disease and sustains us. But they have thrown us out."

The eight people in his old home, like their neighbours in the Lidroo village region, rear livestock in summer before bunkering down in their huts in winter.

All of them, including 90-year-old



grandmother Janat Begam, were forced to take refuge in cramped homes with other relatives.

More than 100 million people live in forests across India and are subject to laws meant to protect their right of residency if they have occupied their land for three generations.

But last November, authorities began sending out eviction notices after claiming that more than 60,000 people were illegally living in or cultivating land in Kashmir's forests.

Control of Kashmir is divided between India and Pakistan, with both claiming the territory

in full -- a dispute that has sparked deadly confrontations between the nuclear-armed rivals.

New Delhi has half a million troops stationed in Kashmir as it fights a decades-long insurgency in a conflict that has killed tens of thousands of people, most of them civilians.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has sought to tighten India's grip on Kashmir and in 2019 scrapped laws guaranteeing its people limited autonomy.

The move was accompanied by the mass arrest of political leaders and dissidents, as well as a months-long phone and internet blackout.

It also paved the way for Indians outside Kashmir to buy land there for the first time, and made the territory subject to national laws that determine who has the right to live or tend land in its forests.

"The evictions and alienating these people from the forests amounts to direct dispossession," local activist Raja Muzaffar Bhat told AFP.

Others accuse Modi's Hindu-nationalist government of wanting to dilute the local population in India's only Muslim-majority territory.