



Thailand's Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha receives an injection of the AstraZeneca coronavirus disease vaccine at the Government House in Bangkok, Thailand yesterday. Prayuth Chan-ocha became the first person to be inoculated with the vaccine in the Southeast Asian country after the rollout had been temporarily put on hold over safety concerns. Prayuth and other cabinet members had been initially due to get their vaccine shots on Friday, before Thailand suspended use of the AstraZeneca vaccine after reports it could cause blood clots prompted a number of European countries to hit pause.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## India widens virus curbs

Cases top 20,000 for 6th day; EU 'firmly' backs AstraZeneca vaccine as WHO experts to meet

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India reported 24,492 new coronavirus cases yesterday, the sixth straight day of more than 20,000 infections, as curbs to try to stop the spread of Covid-19 were expanded in parts of the country that have recorded a surge.

Total cases have now risen to 11.41 million, the highest in the world after the United States and Brazil. Deaths increased by 131 to 158,856 in the past 24 hours, data from the health ministry showed.

The government has blamed crowding and a general reluctance to wear masks for the spike, ruling out mutations of the virus as a factor, unlike in the West.

India's worst affected state, Maharashtra, on Monday ordered cinemas, hotels and restaurants to limit guests to half of capacity until the end of the month. Weddings and other social events will also have limited attendance.

Maharashtra has also locked down some districts. Another western state, Gujarat, has also decided to not allow fans into the world's biggest cricket stadium hosting international matches between India and England, after seeing a spurt in cases.

India has vaccinated nearly 26 million people since beginning its inoculation campaign in mid-January. The country aims to vaccinate 300 million of its 1.35 billion people by August, reports Reuters.

Meanwhile, the number of deaths from Covid-19 across Europe passed 900,000 yesterday, according to an AFP tally of official figures provided by health authorities.



At least 2,661,919 million people have died of coronavirus around the world since the outbreak began in December 2019.

Global health experts came under increasing pressure yesterday to clear up questions over the safety of AstraZeneca's Covid-19 shot, as Sweden and Latvia joined countries suspending their use in a further blow to Europe's vaccination rollout.

The EU's drug regulator said it remained "firmly convinced" of the benefits of AstraZeneca's coronavirus vaccine despite several countries suspending its use over blood clot fears.

World Health Organization experts were scheduled to meet yesterday to discuss the vaccine.

After becoming the first country outside of Europe to temporarily delay the AstraZeneca vaccine, Thailand lifted its suspension and premier Prayut Chan-O-cha received the first jab.

An international expert team that visited China to investigate the origins of Covid-19 has postponed publishing their report, which will now likely appear next week, the WHO said.

### NEWS IN BRIEF

#### Europe's droughts since 2015 'worst in 2,000 years'

Recent summer droughts in Europe were the most severe the region has seen in 2,110 years as climate change has stoked punishing heat waves, according to new research Monday that raises the alarm for ecosystems and agriculture. Using data from tree rings in living and dead European oaks going back to the time of the Romans, scientists identified a long-term drying trend that suddenly intensified in 2015 beyond anything seen in two millennia. The researchers said that this cluster of abnormally dry summers was likely caused by human-driven climate warming and changes to the circulation of the jet stream. "Climate change does not mean that it will get drier everywhere: some places may get wetter or colder, but extreme conditions will become more frequent, which could be devastating for agriculture, ecosystems and societies as a whole," said lead author Ulf Buntgen, of Cambridge University.

#### UK to increase nuclear stockpile: reports

Britain is to announce an increase to its nuclear weapons stockpile as part of a wide-ranging review of security, defence and foreign policy, two newspapers said on Monday. The Guardian and The Sun said in their online editions that the country would look to raise the number of warheads from 180 to 260 by the middle of the decade. Both dailies said details were contained in a leak they had seen of the government's long-awaited Integrated Review, due to be published yesterday. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) called the reports "shocking" given the pressures of the global coronavirus pandemic and climate change.

#### Haaland makes history



US Representative Deb Haaland was confirmed on Monday as Secretary of the Interior, becoming the first Native American to lead a cabinet agency and securing a central role in President Joe Biden's sweeping plans to fight climate change. The US Senate confirmed the New Mexico Democrat 51-40 after she clinched support from Republicans including South Carolina Senator Lindsey Graham, Alaska Senators Lisa Murkowski and Dan Sullivan and Maine Senator Susan Collins. She faced resistance from Republican lawmakers who grilled her at a two-day hearing last month about her involvement in pipeline protests, her support of the Green New Deal climate resolution, and the Biden administration's pause on new federal drilling leases.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

## US warns China on 'coercion'

Top diplomat Blinken vows to push back if necessary in his first Asia tour

REUTERS, Tokyo

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken yesterday warned China against using "coercion and aggression" as he sought to use his first trip abroad to shore up Asian alliances in the face of growing assertiveness by Beijing.

China's extensive territorial claims in the East and South China Seas have become a priority issue in an increasingly testy Sino-US relationship and are an important security concern for Japan.

"We will push back, if necessary, when China uses coercion and aggression to get its way," Blinken said.

His visit to Tokyo with Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin is the first overseas visit by top members of President Joe Biden's cabinet. It follows last week's summit of the leaders of the Quad grouping of the United States, Japan, Australia and India.

Blinken's comments come ahead of meetings in Alaska on Thursday that will bring together for the first time senior Biden administration officials and their Chinese counterparts to discuss frayed ties



between the world's top two economies.

Washington has criticised what it called Beijing's attempts to bully neighbors with competing interests. China has denounced what it called US efforts to foment unrest in the region and interfere in what it calls its internal affairs.

In the statement issued with their Japanese counterparts, Blinken and Austin said, "China's behavior, where inconsistent with the existing international order, presents political, economic, military and technological challenges to the alliance

and to the international community."

The two countries committed themselves to opposing coercion and destabilizing behavior towards others in the region that undermines the rules-based international system, they added.

The meeting was held in the "2+2" format with Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi and Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi as hosts.

The ministers also discussed Washington's "unwavering commitment" to defend Japan in its dispute with China over islets in the East China Sea and repeated their opposition to China's "unlawful" maritime claims in the South China Sea.

They also shared concerns over developments such as the law China passed in January allowing its coast guard to fire on foreign vessels.

In Beijing, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian told a regular news briefing that US-Japan ties "shouldn't target or undermine the interests of any third party," and should boost "peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific".

## Combat violence against women

Urges UN chief Guterres

AFP, United Nations

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called Monday to combat violence against women, at the start of the annual Commission on the Status of Women, which is expected to call for greater action against sexual harassment.

During the pandemic, women have been more exposed than men to harmful consequences, Guterres said, citing loss of jobs, sexual abuse or child marriage.

"Women's equal participation is the game-changer we need," he said, calling for gender equality and gender parity in leadership.

"Only 22 countries are headed by a woman Head of State or Government. And at current rates parity among Heads of Government will not be achieved until 2150," Guterres said. "That's right, another 130 years of men making the same kinds of decisions they have made for the past 130 years and more."

According to the UN chief, the coronavirus pandemic "provided yet another opportunity for men to dominate decision-making."

"And we spend trillions on weapons that fail to make us safer, while neglecting the violence that one in three women globally have experienced," he said.

"Changing these default settings must be seen as an imperative," Guterres said.

## British foreign policy pivots towards Indo-Pacific

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Britain wants to expand its influence among democratic nations in the Indo-Pacific region while preserving strong ties with the United States, a document laying out the country's post-Brexit foreign policy priorities will say.

Putting Britain at odds with China, the biggest review of British foreign and defence policy since the end of the Cold War three decades ago will set out how Prime Minister Boris Johnson wants to be at the forefront of a reinvigorated, rules-based international order based on cooperation and free trade.

Calling the Indo Pacific "increasingly the geopolitical centre of the world", the government highlighted a British aircraft carrier deployment to the region and announced a previously postponed visit to India will go ahead in April.

Since completing its exit from the European Union at the end of last year after an acrimonious divorce, Johnson's government has vowed the "Integrated Review" will show Britain still had clout on the world stage and define a new era for the country.

"I am profoundly optimistic about the UK's place in the world and our ability to seize the opportunities ahead," Johnson will say to parliament.

Relations with China, which is on course to become the world's largest economy, have frayed badly over issues including Beijing's handing of former British colony Hong Kong, increasingly vocal criticism of China state-subsidised industry and security concerns around Chinese investment in Britain.

Foreign minister Dominic Raab told Sky News Britain would like to have a positive relationship with China but not at the expense of upholding its values, saying that required a "calibrated approach" towards Beijing.

A statement previewing Tuesday's report listed "the importance of our relationship with the US" alongside the defence of democracy and human rights, and safety from terrorism as fundamental components of British policy.



Activists from the anti-globalisation organisation Attac protest against a "global security bill" that has been tabled by the French government in a bid to protect the identity of police officials, at the Place de la République in Paris, France yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## Lethal air pollution high in 2020

Report says four of the five countries were not up to the mark despite lockdowns; New Delhi most polluted capital; South Asian cities suffered the most

AFP, Paris

Deadly small particle pollution in four of five nations exceeded World Health Organization (WHO) recommendations last year despite Covid lockdowns, according to a report released yesterday.

The partial or complete shutdown of transport and industry for months at a time in 2020 reduced average levels of so-called PM2.5 pollution across the world, including in major cities, the IQAir quality report found.

Concentrations of the life-shortening particles -- cast off by traffic pollution and burning fossil fuels -- dropped 11 percent in Beijing, 13 percent in Chicago, 15 percent in New Delhi, 16 percent in London, and 16 percent in Seoul.

At least 60 percent of India's cities were more breathable last year than in 2019, and all of them had cleaner air than in 2018.

"Many parts of the world experienced unprecedented -- but short-lived -- improvements



in air quality in 2020," said Lauri Myllyvirta, lead analyst at the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA) and co-author of the report.

"This meant tens of thousands of avoided deaths from air pollution."

But only 24 of 106 countries monitored met WHO safety guidelines, said the report, based on the world's largest database of ground-level air pollution measurements.

China and many South Asian nations experienced PM2.5 pollution several times greater than WHO recommended thresholds, and in some regions the concentration was six to eight times higher.

Twenty-two of the world's more polluted cities are in India. Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Mongolia and Afghanistan averaged annual PM2.5 concentrations between 77 and 47 microgrammes per cubic metre (mcg/m3) of air.

The UN says PM2.5 density should not top 25 mcg/m3 in any 24-hour period, or 10 mcg/m3 averaged across an entire year.

The most polluted capital cities in the world last year were New Delhi (84 mcg/m3) and Dhaka (77), with Jakarta, Kathmandu, Islamabad, Hanoi and Beijing all in the top 20.

Air pollution shortens lives worldwide by nearly three years on average, and causes more than eight million premature deaths annually, earlier studies have found. The WHO calculates 4.2 million deaths from outdoor air pollution.

## Cease war games if you want to 'sleep in peace'

N Korea tells US, warns against escalation

REUTERS, Seoul

The sister of North Korean leader, Kim Yo Jong, criticised ongoing military drills in South Korea and warned the new US administration that the smell of cordite wafting over the border would not help bring peace, state news reported yesterday.

Kim's statement was the North's first public message to Washington since President Joe Biden took office in January. It was delivered a day before US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin are due to arrive in Seoul for their first talks with South Korean counterparts.

"We take this opportunity to warn the new US administration trying hard to give off powder smell in our land," Kim said in a statement carried by state news agency KCNA. "If it wants to sleep in peace for

coming four years, it had better refrain from causing a stink at its first step."

For all the imagery of Kim's words, the joint springtime military drill begun last week was limited to computer simulations because of the coronavirus risk as well as the ongoing efforts to engage with the North.

But her message was clear. "War drills and hostility can never go with dialogue and cooperation," Kim Yo Jong said.

When asked about Kim Yo Jong's statement, Blinken told a briefing in Tokyo that he was aware of her comments, but that he was more interested in hearing what America's allies and partners think about North Korea.

The new US administration is expected to wrap up a review of North Korea policy in coming weeks.