

NEWS
IN *brief*



Hardliner set to win Iran polls

Iranians voted yesterday in an election expected to hand the presidency to a hardline judge subject to US sanctions, though many are likely to ignore the ballot amid economic hardship and calls for a boycott by critics at home and abroad. Hardliner Ebrahim Raisi, 60, is the favourite to succeed Hassan Rouhani. A close Khamenei ally and like him a harsh critic of the West, Raisi is under US sanctions for alleged involvement in executions of political prisoners decades ago.



Biden gifts Putin pair of aviators

For his first meeting with Vladimir Putin in Geneva this week, President Joe Biden gifted his Russian counterpart a pair of American-made sunglasses in the US leader's signature aviator style. Specs of this style are often worn by the military — the company has had a contract with the US armed forces since 1978, which buys some 25,000 pairs per month. A matte black polarized pair sells on the Randolph website for \$279.



Israel strikes Gaza again

Israeli jets launched air strikes on Gaza overnight Thursday to Friday after militants in the Palestinian territory again set off incendiary balloons into southern Israel, the army and AFP journalists said. The fire balloons and air strikes are the latest violence heaping pressure on a fragile ceasefire between Israel and Gaza's Hamas rulers that came into place on May 21, ending 11 days of heavy fighting. Israeli army said they hit sites in both Gaza City and in Khan Yunis, in the south of Gaza. Soon after the strikes, Hamas militants opened fire with heavy machines guns towards the Jewish state, as Israeli warning air raid sirens rang out. No casualties were reported.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS



Rescue workers search for bodies after a boat with dozens of migrants from the Maghreb region capsized in the beach of Orzola, in the Canary Island of Lanzarote, Spain, yesterday. At Least 4 migrants were killed in the tragedy.

PHOTO: REUTERS

82.4m displaced globally

AFP, Geneva

Despite the coronavirus pandemic, the number of people fleeing war and persecution continued rising last year, with global displacement climbing to over 82 million -- double the figure a decade ago, the UN said yesterday.

A fresh report from the UN refugee agency showed global displacement figures swelled by around three million in 2020 after an already record-breaking year in 2019, leaving a full one percent of humanity uprooted and displaced.

The report highlighted how drawn-out crises like those in Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia and Yemen were continuing to force people to flee, while eruptions of violence in places like Ethiopia and Mozambique were causing surging displacement.

The fact that the numbers rose for the ninth straight year was all the more devastating because Covid-19 restrictions had been expected to limit displacement.

During the pandemic, "everything else has stopped, including the economies, but wars and conflict and violence and discrimination and persecution, all the factors that pushed these people to flee, have continued," UNHCR chief Filippo Grandi told AFP.

The UN agency found that by the end of 2020, a record 82.4 million people were living as refugees or asylum seekers, or in so-

called internal displacement within their own countries, up from some 40 million in 2011.

"Today's global displacement figures are an epic failure of humanity," head of the Norwegian Refugee Council Jan Egeland said, pointing out that "far more people are on the move today than anytime during World War II."

"Yet despite the staggering statistics, world leaders have been inept to resolve the greatest emergency of our generation."

The UNHCR report highlighted that a full

» UNHCR report says conflicts, persecution, rights abuses doubled the numbers in a decade

» 42pc of them are girls, boys under age of 18

42 percent of the world's displaced are girls and boys under the age of 18.

"The tragedy of so many children being born into exile should be reason enough to make far greater efforts to prevent and end conflict and violence," Grandi said.

Some 26.4 million people were living as refugees at the end of 2020, including 5.7 million Palestinians.

Some 3.9 million Venezuelans were also displaced beyond their borders without being

considered refugees, while 4.1 million people were registered worldwide as asylum seekers.

In 2020, at least 164 countries closed their borders because of Covid-19, and more than half of them made no exceptions for asylum seekers and refugees fleeing for their lives.

Last year, more than 11 million people were newly displaced, the report showed.

They include Syria, which after more than a decade of war counts 13.5 million people displaced either inside or outside the country -- more than half of its population and a sixth of the global displacement total.

More than two-thirds of the world's refugees meanwhile come from just five countries: Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan, South Sudan and Myanmar.

Turkey remained the host of the world's largest refugee population totalling some 3.7 million, followed by Colombia with 1.7 million, Pakistan and Uganda with 1.4 million each and Germany with 1.2 million.

While needs are continuously rising, solutions for the displaced seemed to dwindle last year. Over the course of 2020, only around 3.2 million IDPs and just 251,000 refugees returned to their homes, marking drops of 40 and 21 percent respectively from 2019.

And only 34,400 vulnerable refugees were resettled in third countries last year -- the lowest level in 20 years, the report said.

FOREIGN COUNTRY COLLUSION

Two newspaper executives charged in HK

REUTERS, Hong Kong

Hong Kong police charged the chief editor and chief executive of pro-democracy tabloid Apple Daily yesterday with collusion with a foreign country, a national security case that has sent chills through the city's media.

On Thursday, 500 police raided the media outlet and officers were seen sitting in front of computers in the newsroom after the arrest of five Apple Daily executives at dawn on suspicion that dozens of its articles violated Hong Kong's new security law.

Police said it charged two of the five on Friday, identified by Apple Daily as editor-in-chief Ryan Law and chief executive officer Cheung Kim-hung. The other three, Chief Operating Officer Chow Tat-kuen, Deputy Chief Editor Chan Puiman and Chief Executive Editor Cheung Chi-wai, were released from custody late yesterday.

Police also said they would prosecute three companies related to Apple Daily for the same offence after freezing HK\$18 million (\$2.32 million) of their assets.

The arrests have raised further alarm over media freedom in Hong Kong and have been criticised by Western governments and international rights groups and press associations.



The chief UN human rights spokesperson, Rupert Colville, told Reuters on Friday the raid "sends a further chilling message for media freedom".

The national security law imposed by Beijing in 2020 on the former British colony has dropped an authoritarian chill over most aspects of life in Hong Kong, including education and arts.

Democracy supporters flocked to buy copies of 26-year-old Apple Daily yesterday to protest against the raid.

The popular paper increased its Friday press run to 500,000 copies, up from 80,000 the previous day.

In the Mong Kok district, queues formed at some kiosks at midnight.

"You never know when this newspaper will die," said one reader who only gave his last name, Tsang, because of the sensitivity of the matter. "As Hong Kongers, we need to preserve the history. Hang in there as long as we can. Although the road is rough, we still need to walk it, as there's no other road."



Yoga practitioners attend a class on the Edge Observation Deck, billed as the 'highest outdoor sky deck in the Western Hemisphere' at 1,131 feet (345 meters), and overlooking the Manhattan skyline, in New York, yesterday. Pandemic restrictions have been gradually lifted in the US with just over 52 percent of the US population, or 174 million people, having received at least one dose, according to health officials.

PHOTO: AFP

Global death toll exceeds 4m

AGENCIES

Coronavirus-related deaths worldwide passed a grim milestone of 4 million on Thursday, according to a Reuters tally, as many countries struggle to procure enough vaccines to inoculate their populations.

While the number of new cases and deaths have abated in countries like the United States and Britain, several nations have vaccine shortages as the Delta variant becomes the dominant strain around the world.

It took over a year for the Covid-19 death toll to hit 2 million, while the next 2 million were recorded in just 166 days, according to a Reuters analysis.

The top five countries by total number of deaths -- the United States, Brazil, India, Russia and Mexico -- represent about 50% of all deaths in the world, while Peru, Hungary, Bosnia, the Czech Republic and Gibraltar have the highest death rates when adjusted for population.

Countries in Latin America are facing their worst outbreak since March, with 43 of every 100 infections

in the world being reported in the region, according to a Reuters analysis. The top nine countries reporting the most deaths per capita over the last week were all in Latin America.

In Moscow, new coronavirus infections hit a pandemic high yesterday, tripling in just weeks due to the Delta variant and forcing Russia's

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

» Moscow sees record case and 90 pc of them are Delta variant

» Palestinians to get million vaccine doses in swap with Israel

» -Spain to scrap outdoor masks

capital to close its Euro fan zone and extend other curbs.

A total of 9,056 new cases were recorded in the megapolis of 12 million in the past 24 hours, with Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin saying that the highly infectious Delta variant first identified in India represented

almost 90 percent of new cases.

Meanwhile, Israel is to provide around one million doses of Covid-19 vaccine to the Palestinian Authority in a swap as their expiry date looms, the Israeli PM's office said yesterday.

Spain will lift the legal requirement to wear a mask outdoors from June 26, Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez said yesterday.

"This will be the last weekend when we wear masks outdoors because next June 26 we won't have to wear masks in outdoor public spaces," he said.

South Africa is deploying army medical personnel to its commercial hub and most populous province to help health workers battle a surge in coronavirus, the government said yesterday.

Meanwhile, UN members debated this week hosting September's General Assembly in person with smaller-than-normal delegations because of the pandemic, an option amenable to host country the US.

Due to the global health crisis the 2020 gathering was held virtually, with leaders submitting pre-recorded videos instead of visiting New York.

Twitter's India head summoned

AFP, New Delhi

Indian police have summoned Twitter's top local executive over a viral video on the site of a Muslim man being assaulted, with authorities accusing the US social media giant of stoking sectarian tensions.

The order comes as a battle rages between foreign tech giants and the Indian government over new rules on removing and identifying the authors of online material deemed illegal or inflammatory.

According to a notice served to Twitter on Thursday, managing director Manish Maheshwari must report to a police station and make a statement within a week.

The platform "let content go viral that promoted enmity between various communities in the state and country", Uttar Pradesh police said in the notice, seen by AFP.

Twitter declined to comment and the video was still available on the site yesterday.

Last month Indian police visited Twitter's offices after the firm labelled tweets by the

ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's national spokesman as "manipulated media". The US company later accused authorities of "intimidation".

The video causing the furore shows an elderly Muslim man forcibly having his beard shaved off. Twitter users shared the footage and news reports that said the man was forced to chant "Jai Shri Ram" ("Hail Lord Ram"), a rallying cry for Hindu nationalists.

VIRAL ASSAULT VIDEO



Police have said the incident was not a hate crime but a personal dispute and that the man was assaulted by both Hindu and Muslim men.

Earlier this week they filed a case against Twitter, three journalists, three members of the Congress party and the investigative news website The Wire. The preliminary charges include promoting enmity among communities, being party to a "criminal conspiracy" and spreading fake news.

Reporters Without Borders, echoing local rights groups, called on police to withdraw the "absurd" case, calling it "judicial harassment".

MYANMAR COUP

UN set to call for halt of arms to junta

REUTERS, New york

The United Nations General Assembly was yesterday set to call for a stop to the flow of arms to Myanmar and urge the military to respect November election results and release political detainees, including leader Aung San Suu Kyi, diplomats said.

Western states have been pushing the 193-member body to consider a draft resolution, but it was postponed at the last minute in a bid to win more support, including from nine Southeast Asian nations.

It was not immediately clear if any countries would call for a vote on the draft General Assembly resolution or if it would be adopted by consensus. Diplomats said the text had enough support to pass if put to a vote.

TENSIONS IN KOREAN PENINSULA

'Dialogue' or 'confrontation'

Kim signals willingness to talks with Biden amid food, Covid crises

REUTERS, Seoul

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un urged preparation for both dialogue and confrontation with the United States, particularly the latter, state news agency KCNA said yesterday, in his first direct comment on US President Joe Biden's administration.

Kim laid out "appropriate strategic and tactical counteraction" to deal with Washington in a detailed analysis of its North Korea policy at Thursday's plenary meeting of his ruling Workers' Party's central committee, KCNA said.

"The general secretary stressed the need to get prepared for both dialogue and confrontation, especially to get fully prepared for confrontation, in order to protect the dignity of our state and its interests for independent development."

Such moves would "reliably

guarantee the peaceful environment and the security of our state," it added. Kim also emphasized the need to create a "favourable external climate" for the North's own initiatives.



The report gave no details of any course of action, however.

Kim's remarks came two days before the newly appointed US envoy for North Korea, Sung Kim, is set to arrive in South Korea on his first visit since taking up the role last month.

He will hold talks with South Korean and Japanese counterparts

and meet other Seoul officials during his stay until June 23, the State Department said on Thursday.

Kim's comments continue a "wait and see" policy, while refraining from provoking the Biden administration, said Vipin Narang, a nuclear affairs expert at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the United States.

"It seems to suggest that Pyongyang thinks the ball is in the US court at the moment, and it is waiting to see how the Biden administration outreach goes," he said. "Given reports of North Korea's food and Covid-19 situation, one presumes that Kim is also happy to avoid a near-term confrontation."

Yang Moo-jin, a professor at the University of North Korean Studies in Seoul, said Kim appeared to be sending a message to US that he would be willing to return to talks at some point.