

NEWS IN brief

Russia sends aid to Cuba

Russia dispatched nearly 100 tonnes of humanitarian aid to Cuba, the defence ministry said yesterday, following unprecedented street protests over the communist country's worst economic crisis in decades. The delivery directly ordered by President Vladimir Putin, AFP quoted the ministry saying. Two An-124 cargo planes carrying more than 88 tonnes of humanitarian support took off from a military airport near Moscow, a statement said. The cargo included "food, personal protective equipment and more than one million medical masks," it said. The United States this week imposed sanctions on Cuba's defence minister and a special forces unit for quashing peaceful protests.

Drone attacks Iraq base hosting US troops

A drone attack has been carried out on a military base in Iraqi Kurdistan that hosts American troops, without causing any casualties, the US-led coalition said yesterday. The attack comes with Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhemi expected to meet US President Joe Biden in Washington tomorrow to discuss a possible full US troop withdrawal from his country. There were no casualties and no damage as a result of the attack. Iraqi Kurdish media outlets said the attack targeted a base at Al-Harir, 70 kilometres (45 miles) northeast of Arbil, the capital of the autonomous Kurdistan region.

Biden picks Caroline Kennedy as US ambassador to Australia

President Joe Biden plans to nominate Caroline Kennedy, daughter of the late President John F Kennedy, as US ambassador to Australia, CNN reported on Friday, citing three unidentified people familiar with the process. The White House declined to comment on the report. Kennedy threw her support behind Biden's 2020 presidential bid in February of that year, writing that the former vice president was more prepared for the job than his rivals. Kennedy previously served as US ambassador to Japan under Democratic former President Barack Obama.

Philippines evacuates thousands as monsoon rains flood Manila

Philippine authorities moved thousands of residents in the capital, Manila, out of low-lying communities yesterday as heavy monsoon rains, compounded by a tropical storm, flooded the city and nearby provinces. The national disaster agency said about 15,000 people, most of them from a flood-prone Manila suburb, had moved into evacuation centres. In some parts of the Philippine capital region, an urban sprawl of more than 13 million people, flood waters rose waist-high in places and cut off roads to light vehicles.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS



Rescue workers carry the body of a victim after recovering it from a site of a landslide in Mahad, Raigad district, in the western state of Maharashtra, India, yesterday. At least 138 people have died in rain-related incidents, including multiple landslides, in Maharashtra, NDTV reported yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

PEGASUS SPYWARE SCANDAL

Amnesty urges moratorium on surveillance technology

AFP, Paris

Allegations that governments used phone malware supplied by an Israeli firm to spy on journalists, activists and heads of state have "exposed a global human rights crisis," Amnesty International said, asking for a moratorium on the sale and use of surveillance technology.

In a Friday statement, the NGO warned of "the devastating impact of the poorly regulated spyware industry on human rights worldwide."

The NSO Group's Pegasus software -- able to switch on a phone's camera or microphone and harvest its data -- is at the centre of a storm after a list of about 50,000 potential surveillance targets was leaked to rights groups.

Amnesty International and French media nonprofit Forbidden Stories

collaborated with a clutch of media companies, including the Washington Post, the Guardian and Le Monde, to analyse and publish the list.

"Not only does it expose the risk and harm to those individuals unlawfully targeted, but also the extremely destabilising consequences on global human rights and the security of the digital environment at large," Agnes Callamard, Amnesty's Secretary General, said in the statement. Israel group NSO "is just one company."

"This is a dangerous industry that has operated on the edges of legality for too long, and this cannot be allowed to continue," she said.

"Now, we urgently need greater regulation over the cyber surveillance industry, accountability for human rights violations and abuses, and greater

oversight over this shadowy industry."

Amnesty called for an immediate moratorium on any export, sale, transfer and use of surveillance technology "until there is a human rights-compliant regulatory framework in place."

"The fact that world and other political leaders themselves may have come into the spyware technology's crosshairs will hopefully serve as a long overdue wake-up call for them and states worldwide to step up and regulate this industry," Callamard said.

The list of alleged targets includes at least 180 journalists, 600 politicians, 85 human rights activists and 65 business leaders. NSO insists its software is only intended for use in fighting terrorism and other crimes, and that it exports to 45 countries, with approval from the Israeli government.

US, Russia to hold new round of talks

AFP, Washington

The United States and Russia will hold high-level talks next week in the second bid in as many months to encourage stability in the tense relationship, officials said Friday.

The so-called Strategic Stability Dialogue, set up during a June 16 summit between US President Joe Biden and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin in Geneva, will take place on Wednesday in the same city, the US State Department said.

"Through this dialogue, we seek to lay the groundwork for future arms control and risk reduction measures," it said in a statement.

It added the US delegation will be led by Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman.

The diplomacy comes amid tensions on multiple fronts between the two nations, with Washington warning Moscow of action unless it stops a sharp rise in online extortion attacks, which US officials say largely originate in Russia.

Bosnia slaps jail terms for genocide denial

CNN ONLINE

Bosnia's outgoing international peace overseer decreed amendments to its criminal code on Friday to allow jail terms for the denial of the 1995 Srebrenica genocide, a frequently expressed view among nationalist Serbs.

The decree by High Representative Valentin Inzko sets jail terms of up to five years for anyone who "publicly condones, denies, grossly trivializes or tries to justify" the genocide or war crimes committed during Bosnia's 1992-1995 conflict.

In July 1995, Bosnian Serb forces seized the UN-protected enclave of Srebrenica in the country's east and killed about 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys they took prisoner.

It was the worst atrocity in Europe since World War II and was judged an act of genocide by two international courts.

Inzko, whose 12 years in office end on August 1 when he will be replaced by Germany's Christian Schmidt, can impose laws and fire officials under the 1995 peace treaty that divided Bosnia into Bosniak-Croat and Serb entities.

"Genocide in Srebrenica, war crimes and crimes against humanity ... must not be forgotten or denied," his decree read. The decree also envisages jail terms for the "recognition... (and giving of) mementos, or any privileges" to convicted war criminals.

Based in the Bosnian capital Sarajevo, the Office of the High Representative was established as part of the Dayton accord that ended a war in which 100,000 people died. The peace deal left Bosnia split between the Bosniak-Croat Federation and the Serb Republic, linked by a relatively weak, tripartite inter-ethnic presidency.



Police officers detain protesters during an anti-lockdown rally in Sydney, Australia, yesterday. Defying a statewide stay-at-home order, 3,500 mostly maskless protesters clashed with police in downtown Sydney, decrying a month-long lockdown in what the state police minister said was the best case study of a superspreader event since the start of the pandemic. PHOTO: REUTERS

China sanctions US citizens, entities over Hong Kong

AFP, BEIJING

Beijing has announced sanctions on seven American citizens and entities in response to a US advisory on deteriorating freedoms in Hong Kong, just days ahead of a visit from a senior Biden administration official.

Tensions between Beijing and Washington have soured on a number of fronts, including human rights, trade, cybersecurity and the origins of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Last week, the United States warned its business community of the growing risks of operating in Hong Kong, following a clampdown by China in the major financial hub.

US government agencies led by the State Department told entrepreneurs that they face particular risks from the imposition of a draconian new security law a year ago, which it said could "adversely affect businesses and individuals operating in Hong Kong."

In a statement Friday, China's foreign ministry said the move was designed to "groundlessly smear Hong Kong's business environment" and "gravely violate international law and basic norms governing international relations."

In response, China said it would impose sanctions on seven US individuals and entities including Wilbur Ross, the commerce secretary under former president Donald Trump.

While in office, Ross broadened the list of companies that cannot trade with US firms without a prior license, including Chinese telecom giants such as Huawei and ZTE.

Beijing's move comes ahead of a weekend trip to China by US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, intended to address deteriorating ties between the two countries and the highest-level visit an official has made under President Joe Biden.

Others sanctioned include Carolyn Bartholomew, chair of US-China Economic and Security Review Commission; Adam King of the International Republican Institute; and Sophie Richardson, China director at Human Rights Watch.

The Washington-based Hong Kong Democratic Council, which was also on the list, called the sanctions a "badge of honor."

China's statement did not give details about what form the sanctions would take.



JULY 25

1934 - Austrian Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss was assassinated in Vienna by Nazis.

1943 - Italian dictator Benito Mussolini was forced to resign.

1978 - The world's first test-tube baby, Louise Joy Brown, was born at Oldham General Hospital in Lancashire, England.

1994 - Israeli and Jordanian leaders signed a historic declaration in Washington ending the state of war between them.

2000 - Air France Concorde crashes in Gonesse, killing at least 110 people.

SOURCE: REUTERS

G20 fails to agree on climate goals in communique

REUTERS, Naples

Energy and environment ministers from the Group of 20 rich nations have failed to agree on the wording of key climate change commitments in their final communique, Italy's Ecological Transition Minister Roberto Cingolani said on Friday.

The G20 meeting was seen as a decisive step ahead of United Nations climate talks, known as COP 26, which take place in 100 days' time in Glasgow in November.

The failure to agree common language ahead of that gathering is likely to be seen as a setback to hopes of securing a meaningful accord in Scotland.

Cingolani told reporters that the ministers could not agree on two disputed issues which would now have to be discussed at a G20 summit in Rome in October.

"Commitments made today lack substance and ambition. It is now up to G20 heads of state and government



to discard this document at the October leaders' summit," said online activist network Avaaz.

Cingolani said negotiations with China, Russia and India had proved especially tough.

Cingolani said that in the end China and India had declined to sign the two contested points.

One of these was phasing out coal power, which most countries wanted to achieve by 2025 but some said would be impossible for them.

The other concerned the wording surrounding a 1.5-2 degree Celsius limit on global temperature increases

that was set by the 2015 Paris Agreement.

Average global temperatures have already risen by more than 1 degree compared to the pre-industrial baseline used by scientists and are on track to exceed the 1.5-2 degree ceiling.

"Some countries wanted to go faster than what was agreed in Paris and to aim to cap temperatures at 1.5 degrees within a decade, but others, with more carbon based economies, said let's just stick to what was agreed in Paris," Cingolani said.

The urgency of climate action has been brought home this month by deadly floods in Europe, fires in the United States but countries remain at odds over how to pay for costly policies to reduce global warming.

Despite the two points of disagreement, Cingolani said the G20 had put together a 58-point communique and that all the countries agreed that decarbonisation was a necessary goal.



A man walks in front of a destroyed building in Laach, part of the municipality of Mayschoss, district of Ahrweiler, western Germany, on Friday, about a week after floods caused major damage in the Ahr region. The latest death toll from floods that hit western Germany this month stands at 180, with about 150 still missing, authorities said. PHOTO: AFP