

NEWS IN brief

'Potential hijack' of ship off UAE is over: UK agency

The suspected hijacking of a ship in the Gulf of Oman has ended and the vessel is safe, a UK maritime security agency said yesterday, days after a deadly attack on a tanker left two dead, which the United States and its allies blamed on Iran. Earlier, Lloyd's List reported that armed men had boarded a Panama-flagged tanker and ordered it to sail to Iran. Maritime security analysts at Dryad Global and Aurora Intelligence identified the endangered ship as the Panama-flagged *Asphalt Princess*, an asphalt and bitumen tanker. Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said Tuesday that "reported incidents in the Persian Gulf and broader region appear utterly suspicious".

Police officer killed in incident outside Pentagon

A police officer was killed at the Pentagon's mass transit terminal Tuesday in an incident that forced the lockdown of the US military headquarters, the Defense Department said. Employees in the Pentagon building in Arlington, a suburb of Washington, were ordered to shelter in place for more than an hour after gunfire erupted in the bus and subway station just yards (meters) from the entrance. Officials said the site was secure 90 minutes after the incident but declined to explain what happened. Woodrow Kusse, chief of the Pentagon Force Protection Agency, which patrols the iconic five-sided building, said there were "several injuries" but would not provide details or confirm reports that the officer was stabbed and died from his injuries, and that the attacker was shot dead. But US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin later confirmed the death. Austin said an investigation into the incident is continuing.

Fully vaccinated one-third as likely to get Covid: study

Fully vaccinated people in England were one-third as likely to test positive for Covid-19, according to an ongoing survey of the population released yesterday. The latest findings, from a long-running study by scientists at Imperial College London and market research company Ipsos MORI, were based on 98,233 swabs taken between June 24 and July 12. They showed one in 160 people infected with coronavirus, with a prevalence rate of 1.21 percent for unvaccinated respondents and 0.40 percent for those fully jabbed. The study also found double vaccinated people may be less likely to pass on the virus to others than those who have not received a vaccine. However, officials and scientists in Britain have urged caution after the government eased all virus curbs in England on July 19, including the legal requirement to wear masks in certain indoor settings. A US government document leaked last week warned that infections among fully vaccinated people are not as rare as previously thought and that such cases are highly contagious.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS



A view shows damaged cars from last year's Beirut port blast as Lebanon marks the one-year anniversary of Beirut port explosion, inside Beirut port, Lebanon, yesterday. Inset, People carry pictures of some of the victims of last year's blast during a march in Beirut. One year since the disaster, caused by a huge quantity of ammonium nitrate stored unsafely at the port for years, no senior official has been held to account, infuriating many Lebanese as their country also endures financial collapse.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Quotes of the day



I think that Lebanese leaders... owe their people the truth and transparency.

FRENCH PRESIDENT EMMANUEL MACRON ON THE ANNIVERSARY OF THE AUGUST 4, 2020 EXPLOSION IN THE BEIRUT PORT THAT KILLED AT LEAST 214 PEOPLE



As of today, we have shipped over 110 million doses to 65 nations. These vaccine donations from America are free. We're not selling.

US PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN TOUTS LEAD ROLE IN VACCINATING THE WORLD AS DELTA VARIANT SURGES

Taliban claim Kabul blast

Vow more attacks as Afghan forces defend besieged cities

AFP, Kabul

The Taliban yesterday claimed responsibility for a huge bomb attack in Kabul targeting the defence minister, as the insurgents fought for control of a string of besieged cities across the country.

The bomb-and-gun attack on Defence Minister Bismillah Mohammadi Tuesday was one of the biggest in Kabul for months, bringing violence to the capital after intense fighting in the south and west of the country.

The Afghan and US militaries have carried out air strikes against the insurgents to push them back, and the Taliban said the Kabul attack was a response to that.

"The attack is the beginning of the retaliatory operations against the circles and leaders of the Kabul administration who are ordering attacks and the bombing of different parts of the country," Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said in a statement on social media.

On Tuesday, the first bomb



exploded in the centre of Kabul, sending a thick plume of smoke into the sky, AFP correspondents reported. Less than two hours later, there was another loud blast followed by smaller explosions and rapid gunfire, also near the high-security Green Zone that houses several embassies, including the US mission.

The minister was safe and Afghan forces repelled the attackers, but at least eight people were killed, according to interior ministry spokesman Mirwais Stanikzai.

Mohammadi later said it was a suicide car bomb attack targeting his house. A security source said several

attackers stormed a lawmaker's house after setting off the car bomb and shot at the residence of the minister from there.

There was little respite in Kabul early yesterday after a blast injured three people, according to police.

The insurgents have taken control of vast swathes of the countryside and key border towns, taking advantage of the security vacuum left by the withdrawal of US forces.

The Taliban are now targeting cities, with fierce fighting for a week around Herat near the western border with Iran, as well as Lashkar Gah and Kandahar in the south.

Meanwhile, Human Rights Watch accused the Taliban of "summarily" executing detained soldiers, police and civilians with alleged ties to the Afghan government in areas they had recently seized.

The rights group said it had also obtained a list of 44 people who were killed by the Taliban in the town of Spin Boldak, which the insurgents captured last month along the border with Pakistan.

'ACT EAST' POLICY

India deploys warships in South China Sea

REUTERS, New Delhi

India is sending a naval task force to the South China Sea this month to expand security ties with friendly countries, officials said yesterday, signalling its intent to play a bigger role in regional efforts to counter China.

The Indian military has been traditionally wary of antagonising China but the mood has hardened following clashes between troops on the disputed land border last year. The government has since drawn closer to the United States in efforts to push back against China.

Four ships including a guided missile destroyer and a missile frigate will be deployed for a two-month period to southeast Asia, the South China Sea and the western Pacific, the navy said in a statement.

"The deployment of the Indian Navy ships seeks to underscore the operational reach, peaceful presence and solidarity with friendly countries towards ensuring good order in the maritime domain..." the navy said.

The South China Sea has become one of many flashpoints in the tenuous relationship between China and the United States, with Washington rejecting what it calls unlawful territorial claims by Beijing in the resource-rich waters.

In June, a US aircraft carrier group led by the USS Ronald Reagan entered the South China Sea as part of a routine mission and a British carrier group is due to undertake exercises in the Philippine Sea this month.

As part of their deployment, the Indian ships will take part in annual joint war drills involving the United States, Japan and Australia off the coast of Guam, the navy said.

The four countries make up the Quad, an informal group, that US President Joe Biden's administration is promoting as a way to counter an assertive China.

China's Covid cases at 6-month high

Restricts overseas travel for citizens to curb outbreak caused by Delta variant

AGENCIES

China yesterday tightened overseas travel restrictions for its citizens as part of efforts to contain rising coronavirus cases, after reporting its highest number of infections in six months.

The movement of people is coming under more restriction inside China - with localised transport closures and stay-at-home orders in places in some cities - and beyond China's borders.

China had previously boasted of its success in crushing Covid-19, with hard lockdowns in the early stages mixed with tight controls of its borders, but mass testing campaigns have



Local governments have tested entire cities and locked down millions, with the official figures yesterday revealing 71 new infections -- the most since January, but still a low caseload despite the outbreak spreading to dozens of cities.

China's immigration authority yesterday announced it would stop issuing ordinary passports and other documents needed for exiting the country in "non-essential and non-emergency" cases.

The central government has also ordered localities to cut off public transport and taxis in and out of areas hit by the outbreak, the transport ministry said at the same press conference.

In South East Asia, Indonesia's coronavirus

death toll topped 100,000 yesterday as the country struggles to control the spread of the Delta variant.

Israel yesterday reimposes more restrictions as virus cases soar.

Japan warned yesterday that coronavirus infections were surging at an unprecedented pace as new cases hit a record high in Tokyo, overshadowing the Olympics and adding to doubts over the government's handling of the pandemic.

Meanwhile, a draft report seen by Reuters shows the World Health Organization (WHO) is seeking \$11.5 billion in urgent funding to fight the more infectious Delta variant of the coronavirus, amid worries wealthy nations are partly bypassing its Covid-19 programmes.

A large portion of the cash being requested from the WHO's partners is needed to buy tests, oxygen and face masks in poorer nations, says the document which is expected to be released this week. And a quarter of it would be to buy hundreds of millions of vaccines for them that would otherwise go elsewhere.

The paper, still subject to changes, outlines the results and financial needs of the Access to Covid-19 Tools Accelerator (ACT-A), the programme co-led by the WHO to distribute fairly Covid-19 vaccines, drugs and tests across the world.

Malaysia PM defies growing calls to quit

Wants confidence vote next month

REUTERS, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin yesterday defied mounting pressure to quit, saying he retained majority support among lawmakers and would prove it when the southeast Asian nation's parliament reconvened next month.

The biggest bloc in Muhyiddin's ruling alliance, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), is split on its support for the prime minister, who has governed with a razor-thin majority in an unstable coalition since coming to power in March 2020.

In a televised speech, Muhyiddin said King Al-Sultan Abdullah agreed that he should stay in power until the confidence vote, even though some members of his coalition had withdrawn support.

Muhyiddin said there was no question of his resigning as he held a majority.

The influential monarch had helped Muhyiddin retain his precarious hold on power, in order to avoid political chaos as Malaysia battled surging COVID-19 infections and an economic downturn stemming from lockdowns.

Pressure erupted again last week for Muhyiddin to quit, however, after the king issued a rare rebuke of a government move to revoke emergency laws without his approval, an act the palace said ran counter to the constitution.

UMNO said Muhyiddin had lost legitimacy after the rebuke and that some of its lawmakers had written to the king withdrawing their support.



AUGUST 05

1962 - American film actress Marilyn Monroe died in Los Angeles at the age of 36.

1995 - The United States and Vietnam declared an end to decades of enmity, formally established diplomatic ties and pledged a new era of cooperation.

2003 - Bomb blast at Marriott hotel in Jakarta.

2007 - South Asia's catastrophic flood's death toll climbed to 330 amid fears of epidemics and criticism of relief efforts.

2013 - World's first lab-grown beef, the in-vitro burger, is launched in London.

SOURCE: REUTERS

Asean finally appoints Brunei diplomat as envoy to Myanmar

Foreign ministers from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) have appointed Brunei's second minister for foreign affairs, Erywan Yusof, as special envoy to Myanmar, the group said yesterday. Erywan has been tasked with ending violence in Myanmar, opening dialogue between the military rulers and their opponents in the crisis-torn country, according to a communique released after meetings on Monday and Wednesday by the bloc's foreign ministers. The diplomat will also oversee a humanitarian aid package, although no details of the assistance were announced. The United Nations and many countries, including the United States and China, have urged Asean, whose 10 members include Myanmar, to



spearhead diplomatic efforts to restore stability in Myanmar. The appointment of an envoy was central to those efforts but was delayed for months amid deep divisions within the Southeast Asian bloc. On Sunday, the head of the junta, Min Aung Hlaing, announced he had been appointed prime minister and repeated a pledge to hold elections by 2023.

'Brazil is under attack'

President Jair Bolsonaro lashed out Tuesday at electoral authorities for ordering an investigation of his campaign against Brazil's electronic voting system, saying he refused to be "intimidated" and that the country "is under attack." The far-right president, who is up for re-election next year, has recently stepped up his long-time criticism of Brazil's voting system, claiming -- without evidence -- that it is riddled with fraud and insisting there will be no elections in 2022 if it is not overhauled. Brazil's Superior Electoral Court said Monday it would investigate the president for abuse of office, improper use of official communication channels, corruption, fraud and other potential crimes in his attacks on electronic voting. "I refuse to be intimidated," Bolsonaro fired back. "I'm going to continue exercising my right to freedom of expression, to criticize, to listen to and above all answer to the will of the people," he told

supporters outside the presidential palace.

"I swore to give my life for the nation in case of foreign or domestic attack. Brazil is under internal attack," Bolsonaro has long criticized electronic voting, introduced in Brazil in 1996. He has stepped up his attacks in the build-up to the October 2022 elections, insisting on "printable and auditable" paper ballots as a backstop to the electronic system. He has called the Superior Electoral Court's president, Luis Roberto Barroso, an "imbecile" for suggesting introducing a paper ballot could open the process to manipulation. Opinion polls place the 66-year-old leader well behind leftist ex-president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva in next year's presidential race. There are fears he could try to use fraud claims to undermine the election if he loses, following in the footsteps of former US president Donald Trump, to whom he is often compared.

NY governor urged to quit after damning harassment report

US President Joe Biden joined leading Democrats Tuesday in calling on powerful New York Governor Andrew Cuomo to resign after an independent investigation concluded that he sexually harassed multiple women. Cuomo, who drew praise nationwide for his early pandemic response, denied inappropriate conduct and resisted immediate calls to quit after the probe found he harassed current and former New York state employees. But his position was looking increasingly untenable late Tuesday after Biden and House speaker Nancy Pelosi said the three-term governor should step down and state lawmakers moved to impeach him. The explosive report detailed allegations by 11 women that paint a "deeply disturbing yet clear" picture of a pattern of abusive behavior by Cuomo and his senior



staff, state Attorney General Letitia James said, announcing the findings. She said Cuomo engaged "in unwelcome and non-consensual touching and making numerous comments of a suggestive sexual nature that created a hostile work environment for women." Cuomo issued an unequivocal denial. "I never touched anyone inappropriately or made inappropriate sexual advances," he said.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS