



WELCOME 2023

Fireworks explode during New Year celebrations around the world. (From top right, clockwise) Photos are taken from Copacabana beach, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; London, England; Berlin, Germany; Bangkok, Thailand; and Dubai, United Arab Emirates. The world's eight billion people have been ushering in 2023, bidding farewell to a turbulent year marked by war in Europe, stinging price rises, Lionel Messi's World Cup glory and the deaths of Queen Elizabeth, Pele and former pope Benedict.

PHOTO: AFP

More countries roll out China traveller checks

AFP, Beijing

Travellers from China now face restrictions when entering more than a dozen countries as concern grows over its surge in Covid-19 cases, with Australia the latest to demand a negative test before arrival.

Last month, Beijing began dismantling its "zero Covid" containment policy of lockdowns and mass testing.

Australia yesterday cited Beijing's "lack of comprehensive information" about Covid cases as the reasoning behind the travel requirement, which will take effect on January 5.

In recent days, Canada, the US, the UK, France, Italy, Spain, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan have also imposed either a negative Covid test requirement or testing upon arrival for travellers from China.

Meanwhile, Morocco moved to ban all arrivals from China on Saturday, "to avoid a new wave of contaminations".

'Beef up the military muscle' in 2023

Says Kim, calls for 'exponential increase' of N Korea's nuclear arsenal

AFP, Seoul

Kim Jong Un has called for an "exponential" increase in North Korea's nuclear arsenal, including mass producing tactical nuclear weapons and developing new missiles for nuclear counterstrikes, state media said yesterday.

In a report at the end of a key party meeting in Pyongyang, Kim said the country must "overwhelmingly beef up the military muscle" in 2023 in response to what it called US and South Korean hostility, the official KCNA reported.

Claiming that Washington and Seoul were set on "isolating and stifling" the North, Kim said his country would focus on the "mass-producing of tactical nuclear weapons" and develop "another ICBM (intercontinental ballistic missile) system whose main mission is quick nuclear counterstrike".

Such goals form the "main orientation" of the 2023 nuclear and defence strategy, the report said.

Military tensions on the Korean peninsula rose sharply in 2022 as the North conducted sanctions-busting weapons tests nearly every month, including firing its most advanced ICBM ever.

It capped the record-breaking year of



launches by firing three short range ballistic missiles early Saturday, and conducting another rare late-night launch at 2:50 am (1750 GMT Saturday) yesterday, Seoul's military said.

The official KCNA yesterday reported that the launches had been "a test-fire of the super-large multiple rocket launchers".

In a separate KCNA report, Kim said the weapons put South Korea "as a whole within the range of strike and (were) capable of carrying (a) tactical nuclear warhead".

North Korea was emphasising "the possibility of actual action", said Yang Moo jin, professor at Seoul's University of North Korean Studies.

"North Korea is signalling a tactical shift of indirectly pressuring the United States

by pressuring South Korea and escalating tensions on the Korean peninsula starting this year."

Seoul's defence ministry called North Korea's latest threats "provocative rhetoric that seriously damages the peace and stability on the Korean peninsula" and urged Pyongyang to immediately give up its nuclear programmes.

"We sternly warn that if North Korea attempts to use nuclear weapons, the Kim Jong Un regime will face an end," the ministry added in a statement.

The launches come just days after Seoul scrambled fighter jets as five North Korean drones made an incursion into the South's airspace Monday.

Lim Eul-chul, a professor at Kyungnam University, said that the North's latest statement indicated "they are preparing for the possibility of actual war beyond the collapse of inter-Korean relations".

He warned that if the United States and South Korea responded, as was likely, by further ramping up military drills, tensions between the two Koreas would reach "an unprecedented level" in 2023.

"It would indeed be a reasonable prediction that the Korean peninsula could become a second Ukraine if the situation is mismanaged," he added.

Lula returns as Brazil president

AFP, Brasilia

Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva is set to be inaugurated yesterday for a third term as Brazilian president, in a ceremony snubbed by outgoing leader Jair Bolsonaro.

The swearing-in will cap a remarkable political comeback for 77-year-old Lula, who returns to the presidential palace in Brasilia less than five years after being jailed on controversial, since-quashed corruption charges.

In a sign of the scars that remain from Lula's brutal election showdown with far-right ex-army captain Bolsonaro in October, security will be exceptionally tight at the pomp-filled ceremony in the capital.

Bolsonaro himself left Brazil for the US state of Florida Friday -- reportedly to avoid having to hand the presidential sash to his bitter enemy, as tradition dictates. The snub has hardly dampened the party spirit for Lula and the 300,000 people expected at the ceremony. Foreign dignitaries including 17 heads of state will also be in attendance.

Lula faces numerous urgent challenges for Latin America's biggest economy. They include rebooting economic growth, curbing rampant destruction of the Amazon rainforest and delivering on his ambitious poverty- and inequality-fighting agenda. An estimated 30 million of Brazil's 215 million people are living in hunger, and the economy is still struggling to recover from the coronavirus pandemic.



China, US must avoid confrontation

Says Wang Yi, calls for dialogue

REUTERS, Shanghai

China and the United States must pursue dialogue rather than confrontation and avoid the mistakes made during the Cold War, top Chinese diplomat Wang Yi said on Sunday in his first public comments since his appointment as head of the ruling Communist Party's foreign affairs office.

Wang was replaced as China's foreign minister on Friday by Qin Gang, former ambassador to the United States, but he was widely expected to retain a prominent role in foreign policy after his promotion in October to the Communist Party's Politburo, the country's top decision-making body.

In an essay published in the official Party journal Seeking Truth, Wang urged major countries to "set an example" in the face of multiple challenges, citing China's strengthened cooperation with Russia over 2022.

"Over the past year, we have unremittingly explored the correct way for the two major countries of China and the United States to get along with each other," he wrote.

"The two countries should establish a way of getting along with mutual respect, peaceful coexistence and win-win cooperation and put China-US relations back on the right track of health and stability," he said.

Wang's stint as foreign minister saw a sharp rise in tensions between Beijing and Washington on a wide range of issues ranging from trade to Taiwan.

He said in his essay that Taiwan remained at the "core of China's core interests" and the "foundation" on which China's political relationship with the United States is built.



A devotee offers prayers during New Year's Day at a Buddhist temple in Kelaniya, Sri Lanka, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Colombia strikes truce deal with armed groups

AFP, Bogotá

Colombia's government has agreed to a six-month ceasefire with the five largest armed groups operating in the country, President Gustavo Petro announced on New Year's Eve.

"We have agreed to a bilateral ceasefire with the ELN, the Second Marquetalia, the Central General Staff, the AGC and the Self-Defense Forces of the Sierra Nevada from January 1 to June 30, 2023, extendable depending on progress in the negotiations," Petro tweeted.

Despite the government's efforts to negotiate with Colombia's various armed groups, which include a combined total of more than 10,000 fighters, it has so far failed to contain the spiral of violence engulfing the country. Indepaz recorded nearly 100 massacres last year.