

## India, China to resume direct flights

REUTERS

India and China will restart direct flights between designated cities this month, ending a suspension of more than five years, in a move that signals a cautious easing of bilateral tensions, India's foreign ministry said yesterday.

There have been no direct flights between China and India since 2020, even though China is India's biggest bilateral trade partner.

India's largest carrier IndiGo INGLNS said it would begin daily non-stop flights between Kolkata and Guangzhou on October 26. It also plans to launch a route connecting New Delhi with the Chinese city.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited China a month ago for the first time in seven years to attend a meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation regional security bloc.



Students march during a student strike to support Palestinians in Gaza and to condemn the Israeli force's interception of the vessels from the Global Sumud Flotilla, in Madrid, Spain, yesterday; protesters occupy the platforms of Naples Central Station, blocking incoming and outgoing train traffic, protesting Israeli interception of the Gaza flotilla in Italy; and pro-Palestinian demonstrators rally in solidarity with the Global Sumud Flotilla and Gaza, in Buenos Aires, Argentina.



PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS

## Anti-govt protests grip PoK

9 killed since Monday amid internet blackout; Islamabad blames New Delhi

AFP, Muzaffarabad

Days of violent clashes between anti-government protesters and police have gripped Pakistan's Kashmir on the border with India, with nine confirmed killed among scant news to emerge after an internet blackout.

Thousands first took to the streets of Muzaffarabad on Monday, demanding an end to lucrative benefits for the political class, such as free electricity and expensive cars.

Internet and mobile phone services have been blocked in the towering mountain valley, and local media were warned earlier by authorities against covering the daily demonstrations.

However, AFP reporters on Wednesday saw streets that were stained with blood and littered with spent bullet casings, shards of glass and scattered stones, apparent evidence of the chaos.

"The politicians here behave like gangsters ruling over our heads; we want them gone and their privileges removed," said Asad Tabbasum, a 51-year-old protester.

"They should stand with us," according to an official statement by the Azad Kashmir government on Wednesday, six civilians and three policemen have been killed since Monday.

More than 170 police personnel have been injured, along with 50 civilians, in the "violent demonstrations", the government statement said.

Protest organisers say more than 100 civilians were wounded. Security forces and police have flooded the streets of

Muzaffarabad in response to the protests, firing tear gas to hold back the crowds that reached up to 6,000 at their peak.

The military has not made a statement on the protests or responded to AFP requests for comment.

Criticism of the military is a red line in Pakistan, which was ruled for decades by the generals who analysts say are at the centre

of real power in the South Asian nation.

Muslim-majority Kashmir is claimed in full by both India and Pakistan but has been divided between them since their independence from British rule.

The area is considered highly sensitive by the Pakistani military after years of frequent skirmishes and full-blown wars.

Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi said in a statement to the media that a "few miscreants,

on the enemy's instigation, are attempting to disrupt peace and order in Azad Kashmir".

Naqvi did not identify "the enemy", although it is a phrase regularly used to refer to neighbouring rival India.

"Peaceful protest is everyone's right, but taking the law into one's own hands will never be allowed," he said.

Nuclear-armed neighbours

chanted protesters walked past buildings scorched by fire or with broken windows.

Protest leader Shaukat Nawaz, an AAC member, claimed that police had fired at protesters.

"The bullets being fired at us are made in Pakistan to be used against the enemy and are now being used against us," he said.

The government did not respond to his claims. Protesters accused the authorities of harassing journalists and preventing coverage of their demonstrations.

"Our voice has been muted, not just that, they are reporting us as miscreants when we are here for our rights," said 22-year-old Akash Kazmi.

The government said in its statement it had accepted "90 percent of the demands".

"We keep saying to the so-called peaceful protesters to come talk to us and solve the issues through dialogue," National Assembly member Tariq Fazal said in a video statement.

The AAC, which has asked for affordable electricity and more hospitals to be built, denied that its demands had been met.

Nawaz spoke with resentment about the weak internet access in the region, provided only by military-backed companies at high prices.

Protests, as well as funerals, continued yesterday.

"Sometimes they call us betrayers, sometimes Indian agents, we are neither," Nawaz roared through a microphone.

"We will keep fighting till we get our rights."



## Russia looking to 'escalate' war: Zelensky

AFP, Copenhagen

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky yesterday warned Europe that recent drone incursions showed Russia was looking to "escalate" its aggression, as he offered his country's war-honed expertise to help counter the threat.

European leaders from just under 50 countries converged on a conference centre in Copenhagen under tight security after mystery drone flights rattled Denmark.

The drone sightings in Denmark and high-profile aerial incursions by Moscow in Estonia and Poland have heightened fears that Russia's assault on Ukraine could spill over Europe's borders.

"The recent drone incidents across Europe are a clear sign that Russia still feels bold enough to escalate this war," Zelensky said.

"It was never just about Ukraine, Russia has always aimed to break the West and Europe."

European leaders are keen to work with Ukraine's war-tested expertise as they seek to bolster their own defences, and are discussing plans for a "drone wall" to counter the menace from Moscow.

"If the Russians dare to launch drones against Poland, or violate the airspace of

northern European countries, it means this can happen anywhere," Zelensky said.

"We are ready to share this experience with our partners."

French President Emmanuel Macron said that Western countries should be willing to take a tougher line when confronted by Russian drones, to sow doubt in the Kremlin.

"It's very important to have a clear message. Drones which would violate our territories are just taking a big risk. They can be destroyed, full stop," Macron said.

Romanian PM Nicosur Dan, whose country has seen Russian drones crossing over from Ukraine, warned his forces would shoot down the next one to violate their airspace.

As Russia's full-scale war on Ukraine drags on through a fourth year, Europe is scrambling to keep up pressure on Moscow and secure funding for

Kyiv.

Macron said it was key to step up efforts to counter the so-called shadow fleet of ageing oil tankers to "kill" the business model Russia uses to circumvent restrictions on exporting its oil.

In a bid to ensure Ukraine has the financing it needs, the EU is exploring a proposal to use frozen Russian assets to fund a new \$165-billion loan.



## GEN Z PROTESTS Three killed in Morocco

REUTERS, Rabat

Three people were killed and others injured in Lqilia, near Agadir, when security forces used firearms to prevent a group of individuals from stealing their weapons on Wednesday night, local authorities said, in an incident that marks a deadly turn in anti-government protests that initially rallied for social justice reforms.

The protests, which began Saturday with demands for better education and healthcare, have been organised online by a loosely formed, anonymous youth group calling itself "GenZ212." The group has used platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and the gaming app Discord to mobilise support.

Security forces had to use firearms in self defence after tear gas failed to stop the group from storming into the security forces (gendarmerie) facility, local authorities said.

Armed with knives, the group managed to set fire to a part of the facility and to a vehicle, forcing security forces to use firearms in self defence, said local authorities, who did not specify how many were injured.

The GenZ 212 movement is inspired by similar youth-led protests in Asia and Latin America.

## INDONESIA SCHOOL COLLAPSE

### No more signs of life, say rescuers

59 remain missing

AFP, Sidoarjo

Rescuers detected "no more signs of life" at a collapsed Indonesian school where 59 people were believed missing days after it gave way, an official said yesterday, raising fears no more survivors would be found.

Part of the multi-storey boarding school on the main island of Java collapsed suddenly on Monday as students gathered for afternoon prayers.

Five people have since been confirmed dead and 59 people were still feared buried under the rubble after days of rescue operations.

"We used high-tech equipment like thermal drones, and, scientifically, there were no more signs of life," said Suharyanto, the head of Indonesia's disaster mitigation agency.

Distraught families waited anxiously near the site for news of their loved ones. Many burst into tears upon hearing there were no signs of life, and one woman fainted, AFP journalists saw.

Residents near the school opened their homes to families as they waited, while charities set up posts offering food and drink.

Rescuers pulled five survivors from the rubble on Wednesday as frantic parents demanded that they speed up efforts to find dozens of children they believed were still trapped.

Investigations into the cause of the collapse in the town of Sidoarjo are continuing, but initial signs pointed to substandard construction, experts said. The building collapsed after its foundation pillars failed to support the weight of new construction on the fourth floor of the school, the national disaster management agency spokesman said.



## A skull that can change human history

AFP, Bangkok

A digital reconstruction of a million-year-old skull suggests humans may have diverged from our ancient ancestors 400,000 years earlier than thought, and in Asia, not Africa, a study said.

The findings are based on a reconstruction of a crushed skull discovered in China in 1990, and have the potential to resolve the longstanding "Muddle in the Middle" of human evolution, researchers said.

But experts not involved in the work cautioned that the findings were likely to be disputed, and pointed to ongoing uncertainties in the timeline of human evolution.

The skull, labelled Yunxian 2, was previously thought to belong to a human forerunner called Homo erectus.

But modern reconstruction technologies revealed features closer to species previously thought to have existed only later in human evolution, including the recently discovered Homo longi and our own Homo sapiens.

"This changes a lot of thinking," said Chris Stringer, an anthropologist at the Natural History Museum, London, who was part of the research team.

"It suggests that by one million years ago, our ancestors had already split into distinct groups, pointing to a much earlier and more complex human evolutionary split than previously believed," he added.

If the findings are correct, it suggests



there could have been much earlier members of other early hominins, including Neanderthals and Homo sapiens, the study says.

It also "muddies the waters" on longstanding assumptions that early humans dispersed from Africa, said Michael Petraglia, director of Griffith University's Australian Research Centre for Human Evolution, who was not involved in the research.

"There's a big change potentially happening here, where east Asia is now playing a very key role in hominin evolution," he told AFP.

The research, published in the journal Science, used advanced CT scanning,

structure light imaging and virtual reconstruction techniques to model a complete Yunxian 2.

The scientists relied in part on another similar skull to shape their model, and then compared it to over 100 other specimens.

The resulting model "shows a distinctive combination of traits", the study said, some of them similar to Homo erectus, including a projecting lower face.

But other aspects, including its apparently larger brain capacity, are closer to Homo longi and Homo sapiens, the researchers said.

The findings are only the latest in a string of recent research that has complicated what we thought we know about our origins.