

International

West rebukes China over move to tighten grip on Hong Kong

Planned security agencies a 'death knell' for autonomy

HONG KONG: Chinese plans to impose national security laws on Hong Kong could see mainland intelligence agencies set up bases there, raising fears of direct law enforcement and what the United States branded a "death knell" for the city's autonomy. Communist Party rulers in Beijing on Friday unveiled details of the legislation that critics see as a turning point for the former British colony, which enjoys many freedoms, including an independent legal system and right to protest, not allowed on the mainland.

Pro-democracy activists and politicians have for years opposed such legislation, arguing it could erode its autonomy, guaranteed under the "one country, two systems" agreement under which Britain returned Hong Kong to China in 1997. "Beijing is attempting to silence Hong Kongers' critical voices with force and fear," activist Joshua Wong, one of the leaders of pro-democracy street protests in 2014, tweeted.

Hong Kong activists called for people to rise up against the proposal, aimed at tackling secession, subversion, terrorism, and foreign interference, that has sent shockwaves across the business and diplomatic communities. Foreign diplomats fear establishing new Beijing agencies in Hong Kong could give mainland security and intelligence officers enforcement powers. "This is a great moment to reboot the protest," said university student Kay, 24, who took part in last year's often violent anti-government and anti-Beijing unrest, with protesters angry at perceived meddling by China with Hong Kong's freedoms, a charge Beijing denies.

The security law plan hit financial markets on concerns the city's status as a financial hub is at risk.

Hong Kong's Hang Seng index closed down 5.6%, its largest daily percentage drop since July 2015. Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam said her government will "fully cooperate" with the Chinese parliament to safeguard national security, which she said would not affect rights, freedoms or judicial independence. The proposals have heightened tensions between Beijing and Washington, whose relationship is already frayed by trade disputes and reciprocal accusations over handling of the pandemic.

US President Donald Trump warned Washington would react "very strongly" if Beijing went ahead with the security law. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the "disastrous proposal" would be the "death knell" for Hong Kong's autonomy and that the United States stood with the people of Hong Kong. "The United States strongly urges Beijing to reconsider its disastrous proposal, abide by its international obligations, and respect Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy, democratic institutions, and civil liberties, which are key to preserving its special status under US law," he said.

'You can't trust China'

Hong Kong's last colonial governor, Chris Patten, told Channel 4 television that party rulers in Beijing were a "frightened lot of bullies". "You cannot trust (President) Xi Jinping's China. That's different from previous administrations. He tightened up as a dictator. He cannot abide anyone who disagrees with him and the Chinese government."

Britain expects China to respect the rights and freedoms of Hong Kong, Prime Minister Boris Johnson's spokesman said. In his annual report to parliament, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang said China would



HONG KONG: Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam (center) holds a press conference after attending the opening session of the National People's Congress (NPC) at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. —AFP

establish a "sound" legal system and enforcement mechanisms to ensure national security in Hong Kong and Macau, a former Portuguese colony that returned to China in 1999. The proposed move will see China's parliament endorse, then annex the laws into Hong Kong's mini-constitution, the Basic Law, without any local legislative scrutiny, according to a draft seen by Reuters.

The document said the laws will safeguard the central government's "overall jurisdiction" as well as Hong Kong's "high autonomy" given Hong Kong's "increasingly notable national security risks". "When needed, relevant national security organs of the Central People's Government will set up agencies" in Hong Kong to safeguard national security, the draft said. —Reuters

South Asia's cyclone death toll passes 100

KOLKATA: At least 106 people died in the fiercest cyclone to hit Bangladesh and eastern India since 1999, officials said Friday as aerial footage revealed immense flooding in coastal areas. Amphan, only the second "super cyclone" ever recorded over the Bay of Bengal, bulldozed houses, tore off roofs, uprooted trees and left millions without power when it hit late on Wednesday.

Mamata Banerjee, premier of West Bengal said Friday that 80 people died in the Indian state, while Bangladesh's toll rose to 26, health department spokesperson Ayesha Akhter said. The total was much lower than the many thousands of fatalities recorded in previous cyclones, thanks to better forecasting and the timely evacuation of over three million people. However, huge damage was done in coastal areas as vast volumes of seawater rushed inland, inundating villages and shrimp farms that are vital to the Bangladeshi economy.

The United Nations in Geneva said Friday that the saltwater is expected to have "a severe impact on livelihoods for

the next 2-3 years". West Bengal's capital Kolkata was also badly hit, with 19 dead, parts of the old city flooded and hangar roofs at the airport caved in on top of aircraft. The bodies of 11 people who were electrocuted were recovered from the flooded streets. The storm also blew off the black weathercock on top of a 205-year-old church in Kolkata city centre that has survived countless cyclones before.

"It was as old as the church," Father Swarup Bar told AFP. "We have only been able to trace small pieces of one of the wings of the cock so far." Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday morning flew over the affected areas by helicopter and announced \$132 million in government aid. "The whole country is now with West Bengal at this critical time and we will jointly rebuild the areas ruined by the cyclone," Modi said. The European Union also announced initial funding of 500,000 euros (\$545,000) for India and 1.1 million euros for Bangladesh.

Habitats damaged

The damage did not appear to be as



WEST BENGAL: Residents carry Tapas Pramanik (center), 41 in search of an ambulance or vehicle to take him to the hospital, following the landfall of cyclone Amphan in Khejuri area. —AFP

bad as feared in the Sunderbans, the vast mangrove forest area home to Royal Bengal tigers, Ganges dolphins and other endangered species straddling India and Bangladesh. "Some Keora trees in the forest have been uprooted and some branches were broken. But overall the damage was not big," said Amir Hossain Chowdhury, Bangladesh's chief forester.

He said that 65 of the forest's 81 freshwater ponds that are vital for local fauna would now be pumped to remove

seawater brought in by a smaller-than-predicted storm surge. "This is a temporary setback for the forest's wildlife including the Bengal Tigers, monkeys, spotted deer and others," Chowdhury told AFP. Four teams would also scour the dense 140,000-hectare forest to inspect the damage to wildlife, but so far no dead bodies had been found, he added. Like in previous cyclones, the vast Sunderbans area, a UNESCO world heritage site dubbed the "lungs of Bangladesh", acted as a brake on the

Eid al-Fitr together like in past years," he added.

Frustrated police are battling a tide of fake travel documents being sold online and through word of mouth, with authorities on holiday island Bali last week arresting seven people suspected of peddling bogus papers. Markets have also been packed with throngs of shoppers buying food and clothes for Eid celebrations. Some of the Southeast Asian nation's mosques are expected to draw big crowds despite official calls to pray at home. Widespread social distancing violations have generated a slew of angry responses - under the hashtag #WhateverIndonesia - from social media users fed up with fellow citizens' blatant rule breaking.

But that has not done much to convince the people playing a cat-and-mouse game with police by hiding inside vehicles, under tarpaulins slung over the back of trucks, or even, reportedly, inside a concrete mixer. Authorities say they have nabbed hundreds of drivers paid to smuggle travelers. "There are lots of ways people are trying to trick us," said Jakarta police spokesman Yusri Yunus. "We're not trying to make their lives difficult. This is all meant to reduce the spread of coronavirus," he added. Indonesia recorded its biggest one-day jump in virus cases this week with the nationwide death toll at 1,326 - the highest in Asia outside China. But infections and deaths are widely believed to be much higher in the country of more than 260 million, where testing rates have been among the lowest in the world.

Laid-off Jakarta bus driver Maulana Arif Budi Satrio became a local media sensation after he claimed to have made the 500-kilometre journey to his hometown Solo on foot after his car was turned back at a checkpoint. Whether he had vehicular help along the way remains an open question. But the trip earned the exhausted Satrio an official scolding - and quarantine - when he arrived at his destination. The 38-year-old said he did not have the luxury of staying put as the global pandemic threatens to push millions of Indonesians into poverty. "The company I worked for laid off drivers like me," he said. "So I only had two options - stay in Jakarta with no money or go back home." — AFP

Hydroxychloroquine shows no virus benefit, raises death risk: Study

PARIS: A study of nearly 100,000 coronavirus patients has shown no benefit in treating them with anti-viral drugs hydroxychloroquine and chloroquine and even increased the likelihood of them dying in hospital. Hydroxychloroquine is normally used to treat arthritis but pronouncement from public figures including US President Donald Trump - who announced this week he is taking the drug - has prompted governments to bulk buy the medicine. Chloroquine is an anti-malarial. Both drugs can produce potentially serious side effects, particularly heart arrhythmia. And neither drug benefitted patients hospitalized with COVID-19, according to a study published on Friday in *The Lancet*.

Looking at the records of 96,000 patients across hundreds of hospitals, they found that administering the drugs actually increased the risk of dying. They compared outcomes from four groups: those treated with hydroxychloroquine alone, with chloroquine alone, and then two groups given the respective drugs in combination with antibiotics. There was also a control group of patients not given these treatments. At the end of the study period around nine percent of those in the control group had died. Of those treated with hydroxychloroquine or chloroquine alone, 18 percent and 16.4 percent respectively had died.

And those given each drug in combination with antibiotics were even more likely to die: 22.8 percent with chloroquine and 23.8 percent with hydroxychloroquine. The authors estimated that the drugs put patients at up to 45 percent higher risk of dying from COVID-19 compared with underlying health issues. "Treatment with chloroquine or hydroxychloroquine does not benefit patients with COVID-19," said Mandeep Mehra, lead author of the study and executive director of the Brigham and Women's Hospital Center for Advanced Heart Disease in Boston. "Instead, our findings suggest it may be associated with an increased risk of serious heart problems and increased risk of death." —AFP

Ramadan rule-breakers: Indonesians try to beat Eid exodus ban

JAKARTA: Indonesians are turning to smugglers and bogus travel documents to get around bans on an annual end-of-Ramadan exodus that could send coronavirus cases skyrocketing in the world's biggest Muslim majority nation. Thousands are using any trick in the book to reach their hometowns in time for celebrations at the end of Islam's holy fasting month this weekend, a festival known as Eid al-Fitr. "It is a critical moment," said Doni Monardo, head of Indonesia's COVID-19 mitigation task force. "I'm afraid people who go to other regions will come back infected and all of our efforts will be wasted."

Every year, millions of travellers pack into airports, train stations and ports across the nearly 5,000 kilometer long archipelago in a mass migration similar to China's Lunar New Year holiday or Christmas. Fearing a public health disaster, the government last month slapped a ban on domestic sea and air travel and set up roadblocks to stop the cross-country movement. It later relaxed those rules over concerns about a collapse in Southeast Asia's biggest economy, but only for those who could prove they were virus-free and had a professional reason to travel.

That loophole was not lost on Kamal and his wife who set about getting a fake certificate for their daughter, a university student in the capital Jakarta - the country's virus epicenter. With the help of friends, the couple said they managed to obtain a government-agency stamped letter that claimed their daughter was hired to distribute pandemic supplies in her hometown Makassar on Sulawesi island. "We're very worried about her health if she stays in Jakarta," said Kamal, who asked that his real name not be used. "But the most important thing of all is that we miss her so much. We want to celebrate

Morocco inmates make masks for fellow prisoners

CASABLANCA: Prisoners in Morocco are doing their bit in the country's fight against the spread of coronavirus - by making thousands of face masks for fellow inmates. "We feel like we are contributing to the collective effort, even if it's from behind prison walls," 40-year-old Khalid, wearing a white coat and a face mask, told AFP during an interview in the presence of prison management.

An inmate at Casablanca's Ain Sebaa prison - the kingdom's most crowded jail, with some 8,000 inmates - Khalid leaves his cell every day for the sewing workshop, passing through long corridors that reek of disinfectant. He finishes off the masks while others cut the fabric or pack the protective items into plastic bags for distribution to some 80,000 prisoners across the country. The North African kingdom has officially declared 7,300 coronavirus infections, including 197 deaths. It has extended its lockdown until June 10, and anyone going outdoors requires authorization and must wear a mask. Police checks are frequent, and those caught risk up to three months in prison and a fine of up to 1,300 dirhams (\$130) for violating the rules.

'Spirit of citizenship'

One of the aims of the pilot program, launched at Ain Sebaa prison at the start of May, is to "foster a spirit of citizenship" among detainees and "help them to manage their detention during the lockdown", prison management said. Since Morocco declared a medical state of emergency in mid-March, prison visits and any activities that require outside intervention have been halted. Hospital visits are limited to emergencies, while court attendance has also been suspended, with hearings held via video conference.

Over 300 virus cases have been recorded among inmates in the country's prisons, with about a quarter of infections among personnel, according to official figures. Rights groups have urged authorities to release some detainees to limit the risk of infection among the country's notoriously overcrowded prisons. At the start of April, King Mohammed VI pardoned more than 5,600 prisoners. No cases have been registered at the Ain Sebaa facility, which has "rigorously" applied preventive measures, director Abderrahim Kerrari said. Disinfectant has been installed at the main entrance and in areas leading to the cells, and sanitizing gel stands on every table in the workshop.

'Modest contribution'

Some of the mask-makers, like 54-year-old Mustafa, worked in the clothing industry before their arrest. He said he was happy to be "useful to society", while fellow inmate Wafaa, 37, said he'd signed up to develop skills and gain experience. The program also aims to "prepare inmates for reintegration into society by instilling in them values such as solidarity", Kerrari said. Those taking part were already involved in the prison's sewing workshops, and received two days of training on mask-making. Participants are paid for their efforts, based on the number of days worked, although the amount was not disclosed.

The administration chose them for their "good conduct", giving priority to inmates serving shorter sentences, Kerrari added. Collectively, some one hundred prisoners in around 20 Moroccan facilities are making 20,000 masks a day - just a drop in the ocean when compared to the 10 million produced daily in local factories repurposed in the fight against the pandemic. —AFP