

International

Shuttered Australia is becoming a 'hermit nation', warn experts

Borders could remain closed for another year

SYDNEY: Prime Minister Scott Morrison defended his "Fortress Australia" COVID-19 restrictions yesterday, as experts warned that plans to keep the borders closed for another year will create a "hermit nation". "Everyone is keen to get back to a time that we once knew," the conservative leader said in the face of growing calls for international borders to reopen. "The reality is we're living this year in a pandemic that's worse than last year."

Last March, Australia took the unprecedented step of closing its borders to foreign visitors and banning its globetrotting citizens from leaving. That prompted the first population decline since World War I, stranded tens of thousands of Australian citizens overseas and separated hundreds of thousands of residents from family members. But the country now has almost no community transmission and life for most is relatively normal. And the government's recent suggestion that borders could remain closed for another year has sparked fierce debate.

Australian Medical Association president Omar Khorshid yesterday warned: "Australia cannot keep its international borders closed indefinitely." He called for improved quarantine facilities and vaccination efforts to permit borders to slowly open. "At some point, it will not be possible to justify the maintenance of border closures given their impact on lives and livelihoods," he said. A University of Sydney task force examining how Australia can safely reopen this week went further, warning the country "cannot continue to lock itself off from the world as a hermit nation indefinitely".

Panel member Professor Marc Stears said the initial snap measures to keep the pandemic at bay were understandable. "You have to remember there really was terror," he told AFP. "At the start of the pandemic the Australian public were inundated with images from Italy and New York." "There were strong demands for strong action, so the government took the decision to close the border. I don't think anyone really knew how effective a policy that would turn out to be." But, Stears said, as much of the world tentatively reopens, the costs of isolation are mounting. "Not only have you got immediate economic and social costs, but you have the character of the country in question here. There is a fork in the road moment for openness versus closedness."

Vox populi

The economic impact of border closures has been blunted by massive stimulus spending, but a growing number of business leaders from hard-hit industries are also speaking out. Virgin Australia CEO Jayne Hrdlicka led the charge Monday, arguing Australia needs to accept that COVID-19 will not be eradicated and borders should gradually reopen. "Some people may die, but it will be way smaller than with the flu," she said. Morrison called the comments "somewhat insensitive", insisting he would maintain the tight border regime as long as necessary. "I'm not going to take risks with Australians' lives," he said.

The border closures appear to have widespread public support. A recent Newspoll survey showed



SYDNEY: People cross a street in front of a mural of Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison on a building in Sydney. — AFP

73 percent of Australians want travel banned until at least mid-2022. Leaders in Queensland, Tasmania and Western Australia who made a virtue of banning travellers from other Australian states in response to outbreaks, have won reelection at a canter. Slowly, officials are starting to link reopening borders to vaccine targets. So far only

three million doses have been delivered in a country of 25 million people. The premier of Australia's most populous state New South Wales yesterday indicated a target of around 80 percent of adults fully vaccinated. "I don't want us to be closed off from the world longer than we need to," said Gladys Berejiklian. —AFP

Bangladesh journalist faces court

DHAKA: The arrest of a top Bangladesh reporter, who wrote scathing stories on the country's response to the coronavirus pandemic, sparked protests by hundreds of reporters yesterday. Rozina Islam, an investigative journalist for Prothom Alo newspaper, was detained late Monday under the Official Secrets Act, police said. She appeared in court yesterday charged with stealing health ministry documents under the same act. A new hearing was set for tomorrow.

Rights groups say a crackdown on the media has grown during the coronavirus crisis and hundreds of journalists went to the Dhaka police station where the 42-year-old reporter was taken on Monday. Some tried to block entrances to the building and the protests continued yesterday. Before her formal deten-

tion, Islam spent five hours at the health ministry that has accused her of stealing documents, according to a ministry complaint seen by AFP.

Leaders of journalist unions and advocacy groups who spoke at the protests said Islam had been arrested because of her reports on the government's response to the pandemic. Her stories included how urgent medical equipment has been left at Dhaka airport for months, bribes being offered to recruit doctors and alleged graft in procurement at the health ministry. "Her reports have clearly exposed the weaknesses of the ministry to safeguard the health rights of the people during the coronavirus pandemic," the Law and Mediation Centre group said.

It demanded Islam's immediate release. Bangladesh has reported just over 12,000 coronavirus deaths and nearly 800,000 infections, but experts say this grossly under reports the true toll. Activists also say the pandemic has worsened freedom of press in Bangladesh, with the government increasingly using a draconian digital



DHAKA: Police escort investigative journalist Rozina Islam (center) to a court in Dhaka yesterday, a day after being arrested on accusation of stealing documents and taking images by the health ministry. — AFP

security law to stifle criticism. According to Rezaur Rahman Lenin, a UN rights consultant, at least 85 journalists have been charged under the 2018 law during the pandemic.

Saad Hammadi, South Asia expert for Amnesty International, said Islam's

arrest "is an attack on journalistic freedom. The authorities must drop the cases against the journalist and release her immediately in the interest of the state's international commitment at protecting the right to freedom of expression," he said. —AFP

New HK bishop says religious freedom must stay

HONG KONG: Hong Kong's newly appointed Catholic bishop yesterday said he would need to tread carefully with Beijing as it cracks down on dissent—but vowed to plead with authorities to defend religious freedoms. The Vatican announced Monday that Stephen Chow, 62, would be the southern Chinese city's new bishop, filling a role that had remained vacant at a tumultuous time for religious congregations. China's leaders have brought their brand of authoritarian rule to the semi-autonomous Hong Kong after huge and often violent democracy protests rocked the financial hub in 2019.

It has blanketed the city in a broad security law that criminalizes much dissent and vowed to ensure non-patriots are weeded out of public life. In mainland China, organized religions are strictly controlled by authorities and many congregations in Hong Kong fear the city's position as a bastion of free faith is under threat. Chow, the head of the Vatican's Jesuit order in the China region, was peppered with ques-

tions about how he plans to handle relations with local and mainland authorities at his first press appearance since his appointment.

"Religious freedom is a basic right. We hope in our talks to the government to remind it that it doesn't forget that," he told reporters. But he also tread carefully on questions about China's treatment of religions and the destruction of churches in the mainland. "I don't think it's wise for me to comment on matters like China that I don't quite understand. I don't have enough knowledge about," he said. "Not that I am afraid. But I believe that prudence is also a virtue."

Balancing act

Chow said he does "not feel good" about the destruction of churches, but caveated it with: "I do not want to use the word 'oppression'". His appointment comes at a sensitive time for relations between the Holy See and Beijing. In 2018, the Vatican reached a landmark agreement with Beijing over the appointment of bishops in mainland China. It allows the Chinese government a say in naming bishops, something critics believe sells out the underground church in China administered by bishops loyal to Rome that has long been persecuted.

The deal also came despite Beijing launching a mass internment and re-education program against Muslim minorities in Xinjiang, a campaign that rights groups and researchers say amounts to crimes



HONG KONG: Newly appointed Bishop of Hong Kong Rev Stephen Chow (center) says a prayer after a press conference with Cardinal John Tong (left) and Auxiliary Bishop Joseph Ha in Hong Kong yesterday. — AFP

against humanity and potentially genocide. Hong Kong's 400,000 Catholics are also bitterly divided by the city's own polarized politics. Many Catholics have been staunchly supportive of the democracy movement, such as Cardinal Joseph Zen and jailed media tycoon Jimmy Lai. Others are committed Beijing loyalists, including Hong Kong's unpopular appointed leader Carrie Lam. Chow said he was aware of the frictions within his congregation, including at the schools he has taught at. —AFP

Duterte bans ministers from speaking on South China Sea

MANILA: Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has banned his cabinet from speaking out in public on the South China Sea dispute, after key ministers engaged in a war of words with Beijing. Tensions between Manila and Beijing over the waterway—which China claims almost entirely—flared in March after hundreds of Chinese boats were spotted inside the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone. While Duterte has been reluctant to confront China over the issue, his foreign and defense secretaries have repeatedly criticized Beijing for its refusal to withdraw the ships from the disputed waters.

Earlier this month, Foreign Secretary

Teodoro Locsin tweeted an expletive-tagged demand for the Chinese vessels to leave the area. His online swearing prompted a rebuke from Beijing and Locsin later apologised to his Chinese counterpart. "This is my order now to the cabinet... to refrain (from) discussing this West Philippine Sea (issue) with... anybody," Duterte said in a recorded speech late Monday, using the local name for the sea. "If we have to talk, we talk only among us," Duterte told several cabinet members, including Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana who previously described the presence of Chinese boats as an "incursion".

Presidential spokesman Harry Roque was allowed to address the issue in public, Duterte added. China has ignored a 2016 international tribunal decision that declared its historical claim over most of the South China Sea to be without basis. Duterte has set aside the ruling in exchange for promises of trade and investment from China that critics say have largely not materialized. —AFP

Red Cross urges measures to boost COVID jab access

GENEVA: The Red Cross yesterday stressed the need for "extraordinary steps" to increase access to COVID-19 vaccines around the world, including speeding up negotiations towards patent waivers. The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement called for states and pharmaceutical companies to move much faster towards evening out glaring inequities in access to the jabs around the world.

Among other things, countries should accelerate thorny negotiations at the World Trade Organization (WTO) towards removing intellectual property protections for the COVID vaccines, and other barriers blocking a rapid scale-up of production of the jabs around the world, it said. "In the middle of the worst pandemic in 100 years, the intellectual property waiver

for COVID-19 vaccines is a necessary political commitment to address inequities in access at the scale and speed we need," Francesco Rocca, president of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), said in a statement.

"Millions of lives depend on it and on the equally important transfer of technology and knowledge to increase manufacturing capacity worldwide," he added. The WTO has since October faced calls led by India and South Africa for the temporary removal of intellectual property protections on COVID-19 vaccines, in what proponents say will boost production in developing countries and address the dramatic inequity in access. —AFP

News in brief

Austria to phase out AstraZeneca

VIENNA: Austria will phase out AstraZeneca from its COVID-19 immunization program because of delivery problems and wariness among the population following reports of the vaccine's rare side effects, the health minister said. Austria becomes the third European country to drop AstraZeneca, after Norway and Denmark ditched the vaccine over rare cases of severe blood clots in people receiving the jab. "We will probably continue to do first shots with AstraZeneca until early June, and then that's it... AstraZeneca will be discontinued," Health Minister Wolfgang Mueckstein told private TV channel Puls 24 late Monday. —AFP

German police nab fugitive twin

BERLIN: German police have arrested a twin brother from a notorious organized crime family who had been on the run over the pilfering of priceless jewels from a top museum, prosecutors said yesterday. Abdul Majed Remmo, 22, was detained on Monday evening in Berlin, prosecutors in the city of Dresden said. The suspect's twin brother was arrested in Berlin in December over the spectacular heist on the Green Vault museum in Dresden's Royal Palace on November 25, 2019. The twins had eluded German authorities when they carried out raids in November and arrested three members of the Remmo clan, an extended family of Arab origin notorious for its ties to organized crime. —AFP

French cops arrest 4 over burglary

VERSAILLES: Four suspects were arrested yesterday as part of the investigation into the burglary at the home of Paris Saint-Germain defender Marquinhos in March, the Versailles prosecutor's office said. The four suspects in custody, aged 17, 20, 28 and 29, were arrested in Paris and its suburbs, the prosecutor's office told AFP. The burglary occurred on March 14, while PSG were losing to Nantes at the Parc des Princes in Ligue 1. A gang broke into the PSG captain's home in the Yvelines, west of Paris, while members of his family were there. —AFP

UK police probe girl 'link' to killer

LONDON: British police yesterday said they were beginning excavations in the hunt for a missing teenager who may be a victim of one of the country's most notorious serial killers. A forensic team has begun exploratory work at a cafe in Gloucester, western England, after police were given information possibly linking the site with 15-year-old Mary Bastholm, who was last seen in January 1968. Fred West, who killed himself in jail in 1995 while awaiting trial accused of 12 murders, including his 16-year-old daughter and eight-year-old stepdaughter, is said to have confessed to killing Bastholm to his son. —AFP