

International

China's birthrate plummets to lowest figure in decades

Marriages registered in 2020 reached a 17-year low

BEIJING: China's birthrate plummeted to a record low last year, highlighting a looming demographic crisis for Beijing caused by a rapidly ageing workforce, a slowing economy and the weakest population growth in decades. China relaxed its "one-child policy" - one of the world's strictest family planning regulations - in 2016, allowing couples to have two children. Earlier this year that was extended to three children. But the changes have failed to result in the hoped-for baby boom, as the cost of living rises and women increasingly make their own family planning choices.

Last year, China recorded 8.52 births per 1,000 people according to the 2021 Statistical Yearbook released in the past week - the lowest figure since the yearbook data began in 1978. It is a marked drop from the previous year's 10.41, and the lowest figure since Communist China

was founded in 1949, according to the National Bureau of Statistics. In addition, the yearbook showed the number of marriages registered in 2020 reached a 17-year low, with only 8.14 million couples tying the knot last year.

During the initial COVID-19 outbreak, parts of central China were placed under strict lockdown for months and across the country many govern-

ment offices were temporarily closed. For most of last year, however, there were few formal restrictions on weddings proceeding as normal. The number of divorces fell for the first time in at least 30 years, after a mandatory 30-day "cooling-off period" for divorcing couples was implemented at the beginning of 2020.

The yearbook data highlights many social trends troubling the Beijing leadership, which has pushed a socially conservative agenda for society with women as wives and mothers. The results of a once-in-a-decade census announced in May showed that China's population grew at its slowest rate since the 1960s. Amid official efforts to boost birthrates, Beijing in September called for a reduction in terminations that are not "medically necessary". Some questions have also been raised over the reliability of China's data.

Calculations by Bloomberg yesterday suggested that China undercounted the number of births between 2000 and 2010 by at least 11.6 million - according to discrepancies between the statistical yearbook, for which surveys are conducted annually, and the once-in-a-decade census. Two hashtags about the marriage data trended on the Twitter-like Weibo social network



BEIJING: File photo shows two women and two babies sitting on a bench in a park in Beijing. China's birthrate plummeted to a record low in 2020, highlighting a looming demographic crisis for Beijing caused by a rapidly ageing workforce. —AFP

this week, with more than 140 million views. "I think raising a cat is hard, not to mention getting married and having kids", one netizen com-

plained on the thread. Others said the divorce cooling-off period had deterred people from rushing into marriage. —AFP

“ I think raising a cat is hard ”

Taliban say Doha talks to open 'new chapter' with US

KABUL: Next week's talks between the United States and the Taliban in Doha-the second such meeting since the Islamists seized power-will open a "new chapter" in political ties, the group said yesterday. Washington said Tuesday it would continue to hold talks with the Taliban following a meeting between the two sides in the Qatari capital on October 9-10.

"A new phase of negotiations will begin next week between Afghanistan and America in Qatar," the Taliban said on their official Arabic Twitter account. "At this stage, talks will address opening a new chapter in political relations between the two countries, resolving economic issues, and the implementation of the terms in the previous Doha agreement."

The US State Department said the proposed two weeks of negotiations will address several issues such as fighting the threat of the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda groups, as well as humanitarian aid. Talks will also focus on how to offer safe passage out of Afghanistan for US citizens and Afghans who worked for Washington during the 20-year war.

The American delegation will be led by the US special representative for Afghanistan, Thomas West. Last week, West insisted that any financial and diplomatic support from Washington to the



DOHA: File photo shows Head of the Taliban delegation Abdul Salam Hanafi (R), accompanied by Taliban officials (2R to L) Muttaqi, Shahabuddin Delawar and Abdul Latif Mansour, walks down a hotel lobby in Qatar's capital Doha. The United States will resume talks with the Taliban next week in Qatar. —AFP

Taliban was based on certain conditions.

He said the Taliban have to install an inclusive government, respect the rights of minorities, women and girls, and provide equal access to education and employment. Amir Khan Muttaqi,

foreign minister of the Taliban government-which is not recognised by the international community-last week called for the release of Afghan assets frozen by the US in an open letter to the US Congress. —AFP

Hundreds join anti-vaccine rally in Ukraine

KIEV: Hundreds of protesters blocked roads in central Kiev yesterday to demonstrate against Ukraine's anti-COVID measures and vaccine drive, as the country battles a fresh wave of infections. One of Europe's poorest countries, ex-Soviet Ukraine is battling spiralling cases, blamed in part on the highly contagious Delta variant.

A low vaccination rate has worsened Ukraine's outbreak as people are hesitant to get jabbed despite repeated calls from the authorities. Yesterday, protesters in the capital Kiev held up posters reading "Stop the fake pandemic", "Say 'No' to genocide!" and "Say 'No' to lies". Computer science teacher Oleksiy Mykytenko told AFP that he was suspended from work after refus-

ing to get a jab.

"Why are my rights being violated? Why should I get injected with some substance?" Mykytenko, 48, said. There are currently four vaccines available in Ukraine: Pfizer/BioNTech, Moderna, AstraZeneca and Chinese-made Coronavac.

Ukrainian officials recently said that the anti-vaccination campaign is organised by Russia as part of its efforts to destabilise the situation in Ukraine. In an article for the Ukrinform news agency, first deputy secretary of the national security and defence council, Ruslan Demchenko, pointed the finger at "Russian intelligence services".

He said they use social media to "undermine confidence in vaccination" and show that the restrictions imposed to contain a surge in infections are "an attack on human rights". Russia has not responded to these allegations.

Yesterday, the country of around 40 million people reported 14,325 new coronavirus cases



KIEV: Anti-vaccine protesters rally in Kiev yesterday. Hundreds of protesters blocked roads in central Kiev to demonstrate against Ukraine's anti-COVID measures and vaccine drive, as the country battles a fresh wave of infections. —AFP

and 595 deaths from the virus over 24 hours. While the vaccination drive has accelerated in recent weeks after authorities

imposed restrictions on the unvaccinated entering public places, only 26 percent of Ukrainians are fully vaccinated. —AFP

New Delhi to reopen schools; smog goes from worse to bad

NEW DELHI: India's polluted capital will reopen schools on Monday, one week after it announced a partial shutdown over dangerous air pollution levels, authorities said yesterday. Gopal Rai, Delhi state's environment minister, told journalists that pollution levels in the city had "improved in the last three days" and some of the restrictions would be relaxed.

The authorities had announced a shutdown

of some coal plants, a ban on entry of non-essential vehicles, construction work restrictions and urged people to stay indoors as some air pollutants reached more than 30 times the World Health Organization's recommended maximum. Levels of PM 2.5, the most harmful particulate matter that is responsible for chronic lung and heart disease, were still around 120 micrograms per cubic meter yesterday according to monitoring company IQAir - eight times the WHO limit.

Delhi, one of the world's most polluted cities and home to about 20 million people, is covered in a thick blanket of smog every winter after farmers in neighboring northern states burn crop residue.

"The schools, colleges and institutions can

reopen Monday. The government offices where we'd imposed work from home too will reopen and we'll advise officials to use public transport," Rai said. Restrictions on construction activities in the city had already been eased. Cleaner electric and compressed natural gas-powered vehicles will also be allowed to re-enter Delhi.

The Commission for Air Quality Management for Delhi last week ordered "anti-smog guns" and water sprinklers to operate at pollution hotspots at least three times a day. But critics say such measures are cosmetic moves that fail to address the root causes of industrial pollutants, vehicular pollution and crop burn-off coalescing into toxic winter smog. In a report published last year, Swiss-based IQAir found that 22 of the world's 30 most polluted cities were in India. —AFP

China stuns West with hypersonic missile test

PARIS: A Chinese hypersonic test flight involving a high speed missile launch points to a major breakthrough, but Beijing's capacity to deploy the advanced technology in combat is still doubtful, experts said. The American defence establishment has been rattled by the discovery that a Chinese hypersonic glider around-the-earth test flight in July culminated in the firing of a missile in mid-flight at more than five times the speed of sound over the South China Sea, media reports said at the weekend.

Top powers the United States, Russia and China have all been experimenting with so-called hypersonic glide vehicles-defined as reaching speeds of at least Mach 5 - but up to now none had displayed comparable mastery of a mid-flight missile launch.

Weapons travelling at hypersonic speed would enable an attacking military to overcome defence installations through sheer speed and unparalleled manoeuvrability, and allow a country under assault to pick off incoming missiles more easily.

"The Chinese appear to have mastered the thermic and aerodynamic shock effects linked to hypersonic speed," said Joseph Henrotin, defence strategy researcher and chief editor of DSI, a French military review. This, he told AFP, required "huge computing capacity".

US defence officials were caught off-guard by the Chinese display, the Financial Times reported, citing people familiar with the intelligence. Details of Beijing's test are still sketchy, with analysts wondering whether the missile hit or missed its target, or whether there even was a target.

'Great leap forward'

Either way, the demonstration showed that China has made surprising advances in a technology that many experts had placed much further in the future. "The recent tests constitute a great leap forward for China in terms of technology," said Niklas Swanstrom, China expert and director of the Institute for Security and Development in Stockholm.

But, he told AFP, "even if they have the technology, it is much less clear if they have the ability to deploy them and to make effective use of them in combat operations". And, as important as superfast weaponry may become in the future, any edge China may have gained over the US in that area is nowhere near changing the overall military balance.

"We still have to realize that the US is far ahead of China in terms of overall military technology," Swanstrom said. China makes no secret of having developed at least one aerodynamic wind tunnel capable of conducting tests for hypersonic weapons and equipment.

The state-owned Aviation Industry Corp of China (AVIC) confirmed this month that a Mach 8 wind tunnel called FL-64 had been completed and now had "testing capability", including "weapon separation and delivery".

Meanwhile Chinese scientists are building the JF-22 wind tunnel which can simulate flight at 30 times the speed of sound, state broadcaster CCTV reported in August. Chinese Academy of Sciences researcher Jiang Zonglin told CCTV the tunnel could be used to develop aircraft that could "reach any place on earth within one or two hours".

The advances in China's spacecraft development make the reports of the missile launch "credible", said James Char, an expert on the Chinese military at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University. But it was also possible that US defence officials were exaggerating the real danger from the missile display in a bid to secure more money for their own weaponry. —AFP