

## International

# Kremlin decries 'high' COVID-19 deaths, rejects new measures

## Russia's total fatalities hit 217,372 - the highest toll in Europe

**MOSCOW:** The Kremlin yesterday described Russia's COVID fatality toll as "high" and the country's vaccination rate as "unacceptably" low, even as it rejected new restrictions so as to protect the economy. Officials yesterday registered 957 new deaths from COVID-19 over 24 hours, bringing the country's total fatalities to 217,372 - the highest toll in Europe - even as authorities are accused of downplaying the severity of Russia's outbreak.

Under a broader definition of deaths linked to the virus, the Rosstat statistics agency said Friday that by the end of August more than 400,000 people in Russia had died with the coronavirus. The growing toll from the virus comes as Russia's jab drive has stalled. As of yesterday, just over 30 percent of Russians had been fully vaccinated, according to the Gogov website, which tallies COVID-19 data from the regions. "Yes, indeed, the level of vaccinations we have is small, unacceptably small," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters, saying that this is the reason for "such a high mortality rate."

But he dismissed the notion that authorities could do more, saying they had done everything to give the public the chance to "save their lives by getting vaccinated". The Kremlin's task, he added, is to balance limiting the spread of the virus with ensuring that "the economy continues working".

While several Russian-developed jabs have been available for months, authorities have struggled to inoculate a vaccine-sceptic population.

Independent polls show that more than half of Russians do not plan to get a shot. The surging infections have come without any real pandemic restrictions to limit the spread, though several regions have re-introduced QR codes for access to public places. Capital Moscow has so far withheld



Officials register  
957 new deaths

from bringing back restrictions, but yesterday announced that it would open two dozen sites around the city where residents could get free express tests. Officials said the additional sites would allow authorities to "completely avoid the introduction of severe restrictions" and "not harm the city's economy". — AFP



MOSCOW: People walk through the Red Square on a sunny autumn day in Moscow. — AFP

## News in brief

## Austria gets a new leader

**VIENNA:** Austria's top diplomat Alexander Schallenberg took over as chancellor yesterday as the ruling party tries to emerge from a corruption scandal that cost the job of one of Europe's youngest leaders. Sebastian Kurz, a 35-year-old once feted as a "whizz kid", said late Saturday he was quitting the top job after being implicated in a corruption scandal. Schallenberg, 52, was sworn in by President Alexander Van der Bellen shortly after 1:00 pm. Van der Bellen said the government now had the "great responsibility of restoring trust". Kurz's centre-right People's Party (OeVP) and their junior Green coalition partners are hoping to move on from the scandal and serve out the rest of their term until 2024. However, the fallout from last week's events may continue to reverberate. — AFP

## New Zealand's 'no jab, no job' policy

**WELLINGTON:** New Zealand announced yesterday a sweeping "no jab, no job" policy for most healthcare workers and teachers to prevent the spread of COVID-19. "We can't leave anything to chance so that's why we are making it mandatory," said COVID-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins, who is also the education minister. Doctors, nurses and other frontline health workers must be double-jabbed by December 1 while everyone working in the education sector who has contact with students must have their two doses by January 1. The Royal New Zealand College of General Practitioners backed mandatory vaccinations with president Samantha Murton describing it as a "bold, but necessary call" to make. Secondary schools will also be required to keep a register to show the vaccination status of students. — AFP

## Kazakhstan court jails 13

**ALMATY:** A court in Kazakhstan sentenced 13 people yesterday to up to five years in prison on extremism charges which activists slammed as a crackdown on dissent. They were all members of an unregistered organization that is designated as extremist in the oil-rich country and has links to a fugitive tycoon. The Koshe Party is affiliated with Mukhtar Ablyazov, a former energy minister and bank chairman whom Kazakhstan has tried and sentenced in absentia for murder and embezzlement. Yesterday, the court handed four men five-year jail terms. Nine others, including four women, saw restrictions on their freedom imposed for between one and two years. One of the ex-Soviet state's most prominent watchdogs, the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law, said the ruling showed that "the ossified authoritarian system will not allow people decided on democratic change to join together". — AFP

## Over 1,000 migrants cross Channel

**LONDON:** Britain has rescued or intercepted a total of 1,115 migrants attempting to cross the Channel over just two days, the country's interior ministry said on Sunday. Rising numbers of Channel crossings by migrants in small boats have contributed to growing tensions between the UK and France following Britain's departure from the EU at the start of this year. On Saturday, British authorities said they had recovered 491 people in 17 operations and 624 people in 23 operations on Friday, while French authorities prevented 414 migrants from reaching Britain over the same two days. On Sunday the French authorities said they had rescued a further 342 migrants who were attempting the crossing. Dan O'Mahoney, who heads the Home Office team looking to curb the number of migrants reaching the UK, said the government was "determined" to tackle what he called the "unacceptable rise in dangerous Channel crossings". — AFP

## Sankara, pan-African icon who wanted to 'decolonise minds'

**OUAGADOUGOU:** Dubbed Africa's Che Guevara, Thomas Sankara wanted to "decolonize minds" in Burkina Faso and across the continent, but his revolutionary dreams were cut short when he was gunned down in a 1987 coup after just four years in power. The trial of the alleged perpetrators of the assassination, including his former friend Blaise Compaore who succeeded him as president and went on to rule for 27 years, opened yesterday in the capital Ouagadougou.

Despite his short time in power, Sankara remains for many a revered figure. During mass protests which toppled Compaore in 2014, young people carried portraits of Sankara aloft - though many had not even been born during the Marxist-Leninist leader's rule. "Sankara is a whole philosophy, a way of thinking and being, a way of life. Sankara is a pride of Africa," high-school teacher Serge Ouedraogo said. "Today, we can say that Sankara represents a compass for the people of Burkina Faso. He is a guide, it is he who blazed the trail of hope for the people."

## Rise to power

Born on December 21, 1949 in Yako in the north of the poor, landlocked country, Sankara was raised in a Christian family, his father a military veteran. He

was just 12 when the country gained independence from France. After finishing high school in Ouagadougou, he underwent military training abroad. He was in Madagascar for the 1972 insurrection which overthrew President Philibert Tsiranana, considered by foes to be a lackey of former colonial power France. Returning to his homeland in 1973, Sankara was assigned to train young recruits, and stood out while fighting in a border war with Mali in 1974-1975.

After a coup d'etat in 1980, the new leader, Colonel Saye Zerbo, appointed Sankara his secretary of state for information. But the soldier's radical views made him quit the government a year and a half later. Sankara was appointed prime minister in January 1983 after another military coup, which led to a quiet power struggle at the heart of the army. He was arrested in May 1983 but was then made president in August after yet another coup - this one led by his close friend Compaore.

Aged just 33, Sankara symbolised for supporters African youth and integrity. He changed the country's name from the colonial-era Upper Volta to Burkina Faso - "the land of honest men". He moved into a rundown presidential palace with his wife and two sons, along with his guitar - he was a decent player, according to his contemporaries. He also brought a second-hand Renault 5, and imposed the small French model as the car for all government personnel, doing away with bigger vehicles.

## Denouncing 'imperialist' wars

Slender and athletic, Sankara always dressed in army fatigues, and on his belt liked to show off a pistol with a mother-of-pearl handle given to him by



In this file photo taken on August 31, 1986, Captain Thomas Sankara, President of Burkina Faso, salutes upon his arrival in Harare for the 8th Summit of Non-aligned countries. — AFP

North Korean leader Kim Il-Sung. The priorities in his reform program included reducing the size of the civil service, improving healthcare, nationwide literacy, food self-sufficiency, measures to help peasant farmers, vaccination campaigns and building pharmacies in villages. He banned female genital mutilation and forced marriages, among other measures to promote women's rights, which he oversaw with an iron fist. The population was policed by the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution and sanctioned by the Popular Revolutionary Tribunal, which antagonized traditional tribal chiefs and others wielding wealth and power. "We must decolonize minds," he proclaimed. — AFP



TUNIS: A handout photo shows President Kais Saied (center) and Prime Minister Najla Bouden (3rd left) posing with the ministers of the new government in Tunis yesterday. — AFP

## Tunisian president appoints new govt

**TUNIS:** Tunisia's President Kais Saied appointed a new government yesterday, 11 weeks after firing the last one in a controversial power grab, as the country faces acute economic and political crises. State television broadcast a swearing-in ceremony of the cabinet headed by Najla Bouden, the North African country's first female prime minister.

Bouden vowed that "the fight against corruption will be the most important aim" of the new government, in her first public speech since her nomination. The trained geologist also pledged to "raise living standards" of Tunisians and "restore their faith in the state". But Saied has significantly pared back the powers of her office and will technically head the administration himself.

The president on July 25 sacked the previous prime minister, Hichem Mechichi, suspended parliament and granted himself judicial powers. Opponents termed his move a coup but many Tunisians, sick of a political class seen as corrupt and incompetent, initially welcomed it. Saied, a former legal academic, has repeatedly criticized the constitution Tunisia adopted in 2014 which brought in a mixed parliamentary-presidential system, three years after a revolution overthrew veteran dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

The president named Bouden as premier on September 29, more than two months after sacking the administration of Mechichi and removing lawmakers' immunity. In a speech following yesterday's

ceremony, Saied reiterated that his moves were constitutional in light of "imminent peril" facing Tunisia. He said he had acted to "save the Tunisian state from the clutches of those who lurk at home and abroad, and from those who see their office as booty or as a means to loot public funds". He also vowed to "cleanse the judiciary".

## 'Drift from democracy'

Saied, who was elected in late 2019, seized an array of powers amid a socio-economic crisis aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic. The move came as Tunisia faces a looming debt crisis, spiraling inflation and widespread unemployment worsened by the coronavirus pandemic. Bouden, 63, is a political unknown and is not known to have economic expertise, although the new Economy Minister Samir Saied and Finance Minister Sihem Boughdiri both have experience in financial policy.

Economist and former trade minister Mohsen Hassan last month urged the new administration to return urgently to bailout talks with international donors, saying Tunisia was "paying the price of political instability", the coronavirus crisis and "the political class's ignorance of economics". Civil society groups have warned of a drift away from democracy and on Sunday at least 6,000 people demonstrated in central Tunis against Saied's power grab. Only two members of the previous administration were included in yesterday's line-up: chief diplomat Othman Jarandi and Education Minister Fethi Selouati. The strategically vital interior ministry will be led by Taoufik Charfeddine, a Saied ally who held the position in 2020 until he was sacked by Mechichi. — AFP

## Blackmail and scandal: Ex-top cop goes on trial

**MADRID:** Notorious former police chief Jose Manuel Villarejo, whose revelations have shaken Spain's political and business elite to the core, goes on trial this week for blackmail and corruption. Over the last few years, dozens of powerful businessmen, high-ranking civil servants, ministers and magistrates have been tainted by scandals involving this feared former policeman at the heart of the so-called "sewers of state".

With an air of mystery, a grey goatee and a beret perched on his bald head, Villarejo, 70, is accused of secretly recording conversations with the rich and powerful to either blackmail or discredit them on behalf of other prestigious clients. Although Villarejo is implicated in multiple cases, Wednesday's trial will look at just three, all of which involve businessmen suspected of using his services to spy on both colleagues and competitors. The trial, which will be held in San Fernando de Henares, near Madrid, at the Audiencia Nacional, Spain's top criminal court, is expected to continue until January.

But many others are on the docket in this sprawling, complex investigation known as "the Villarejo case", including some which have drawn even more media attention for their scandalous nature. "This first trial will be important for establishing the credibility of the Spanish judicial system," said Manuel Bravo Perez, who co-wrote a book on the Villarejo case. "People are waiting with bated breath to see what happens during the trial," he told AFP.

If convicted for these first three offences, Villarejo could face 109 years in jail, if prosecutors get their way. But the ex-police chief will attend the trial as a free man since the court lifted his pre-trial detention in March, after serving three years behind bars at a Madrid prison. Born into a modest family in the southern Andalusia region, Villarejo was "what you might call a 'corrupt copper'-corrupt because he set up a private consulting business while he was still very much part of the police," explained Bravo Perez. — AFP