

International

China locks down a city of 4 million over COVID-19 cases

Latest outbreak linked to highly contagious Delta variant

BEIJING: China placed a city of four million people under lockdown yesterday, ordering them not to leave home except in emergencies, in a bid to eradicate a COVID cluster of just a few dozen confirmed cases. Beijing imposed strict border controls after the coronavirus was first detected in China in late 2019, slowing the number of cases to a trickle and allowing the economy to bounce back.



Authorities try to eradicate a COVID cluster

But as the rest of the world opens up and tries to find ways to live with the virus, China has maintained a zero-COVID approach that has seen harsh local lockdowns imposed over handfuls of cases. Yesterday's fresh restrictions came as China reported 29 new domestic infections - including six in Lanzhou, the capital of Gansu province in the country's northwest.

The latest outbreak has been linked to the highly contagious Delta variant, with the tally hitting 198 cases since October 17. Thirty-nine have been in Lanzhou. Residents of the city will now be required to stay at home, authorities said in a statement, with the "entry and exit of residents" strictly controlled and limited to

essential supplies or medical treatment. Bus and taxi services had already been stopped in the city, and state media said yesterday that Lanzhou station had suspended more than 70 trains, including on key routes to Beijing and Xi'an.

A Southern Airlines representative told AFP that all its flights from Beijing's Daxing airport to Lanzhou were cancelled due to public safety, with no resumption date given. Health officials have warned that more infections may emerge as testing is ramped up in the coming days to fight the outbreak, which has been linked to a group of domestic tourists who travelled from Shanghai to several other provinces.

Northern outbreak

Strict stay-at-home orders have already been imposed on tens of thousands of people in northern China. In Beijing - which reported three new cases yesterday - access to tourist sites has been limited and the prominent Lama Temple was shuttered, while residents were advised not to leave the capital unless necessary.

About 23,000 residents in one housing compound in Changping district have been ordered to stay indoors after nine cases were found there in recent days, local outlet Beijing News reported. Community mahjong and chess rooms have been closed, and residents have been told to reduce large gatherings. Organizers on Sunday indefinitely postponed a marathon at which 30,000 runners were expected. Mass testing is under way in 11 provinces and authorities have suspended many inter-provincial tour groups.

While the country's case numbers are extremely low



LANZHOU: Residents wait to undergo nucleic acid tests for the COVID-19 at a middle school in Lanzhou, in China's northwestern Gansu province. — AFP

compared with elsewhere in the world, authorities are determined to stamp out the latest outbreak with the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing just over 100 days away. As part of China's strict enforcement of the zero-COVID policy, those deemed to have failed in controlling COVID are often dismissed from their posts or punished. Yesterday, the official Xinhua news agency reported that the party secretary of Ejin Banner in the northern Inner Mongolia region had been sacked, "due to poor performance and implementation in epidemic prevention and control".

Hit by the latest wave, the city locked down about 35,000 residents from Monday. Around 10,000 tourists were also placed under lockdown in Ejin, according to local media reports. Six other officials were punished for their "slack response" to the latest flare-up, state media reported, and a local police bureau deputy director was removed from their position. Beijing police have launched three criminal investigations into alleged COVID safety breaches, deputy director of the city's public security bureau said Sunday. — AFP

Myanmar's junta boycotts summit in protest at snub

BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN: Myanmar's junta boycotted a Southeast Asian summit yesterday after its chief was banned from the event, deepening the regime's isolation nine months after it took power in a coup. The virtual gathering kicked off three days of meetings hosted by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), with US President Joe Biden as well as Chinese and Russian leaders set to attend.

Myanmar topped the agenda of yesterday's talks between regional leaders, with the country still in chaos following February's military takeover and the subsequent deadly crackdown on dissent. Facing calls to defuse the crisis, ASEAN—which includes Myanmar—has drawn up a roadmap aimed at restoring peace but there have been doubts over the junta's commitment to the plan. Its refusal to let a special envoy meet ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi prompted the bloc to bar junta chief Min Aung Hlaing from this week's summit.

The putsch snuffed out Myanmar's short-lived experiment with democracy, and Nobel laureate Suu Kyi now faces a raft of charges in a junta court that could see her jailed for decades. The 76-year-old, a thorn in the generals' side for many years, was due to testify in court for

the first time in a closed-door hearing from which the media have been barred. Min Aung Hlaing's exclusion from the Southeast Asian summit was an unprecedented snub from an organization often seen as toothless.

The junta slammed the decision as a breach of the bloc's policy of non-interference in member states' affairs. The 10-member group invited a senior official from the junta-appointed foreign ministry in the general's place. But the regime said on the eve of the meeting that sending a more junior figure would "affect our country's sovereignty and image". At the opening of the summit, a big screen showed the leaders participating with just a blue display carrying the word "Myanmar", where the country's representative was supposed to be.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong of Singapore, among several ASEAN states that have spoken out strongly against the coup, lamented that "progress has been slow" following the Myanmar coup. "This has real consequences for the people of Myanmar and ASEAN's credibility as a rules-based organization," he told the summit. Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen whose government is itself frequently accused of being authoritarian—also criticized the "lack of cooperation" from the junta.

"We are in the situation of ASEAN minus one," he told the meeting. Cambodia is set to take over the rotating chairmanship of the bloc from Brunei, which is running this week's meetings. As the leaders met online, small pro-junta rallies took place in several townships in Myanmar's western Rakhine state, where protesters carried portraits of military figures and banners declaring their support for the armed forces, local media reported. — AFP

Hunger forces Afghans to sell young daughters into marriage

QALA I NAW: Fahima has wept many times since her husband sold their two young daughters into marriage to survive the drought gripping western Afghanistan. Oblivious to the deal, six-year-old Faristeh and 18-month-old Shokriya sit by her side in a mud-brick and tarpaulin shelter for displaced people. "My husband said if we don't give away our daughters, we will all die because we don't have anything to eat," Fahima said of the choice now facing thousands of Afghan families.

"I feel bad giving away my daughters for money." The oldest commanded a bride price of \$3,350 and the toddler \$2,800 — to be paid in instalments over several years until the time comes to join their new families, their future husbands still minors themselves.

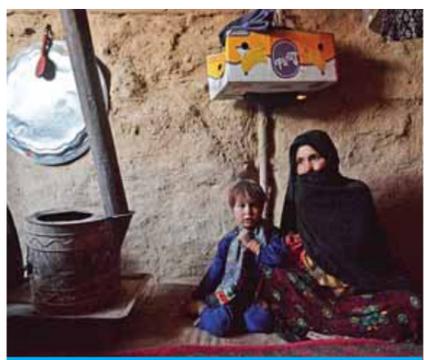
Child marriage has been practised in Afghanistan for centuries, but war and climate change-related poverty have driven many families to resort to striking deals earlier and earlier in girls' lives. Boys' parents can drive a harder bargain and secure younger girls, spacing out the repayments. The World Food Program warned Monday that more than half the population of Afghanistan, around 22.8 million people, will face acute food insecurity from November.

In Qala-i-Naw, capital of the western province of Badghis—one of the regions worst affected by the drought—there is shame and grief. Village and displaced people's camp leaders say the numbers of young girls getting betrothed started to rise during a 2018 famine and surged this year when the rains failed once more. Among farmers driven from their homes, AFP journalists quickly found more than a dozen families who felt forced to sell their daughters into marriage.

Grocery debt

Fahima's 25-year-old neighbour in the camp, Sabehreh, ran up a bill at a grocer's shop to feed her family. The business owner warned that they would be jailed if they could not repay him. To cover the debt, the family agreed that their three-year-old daughter, Zakereh, would be betrothed to the grocer's four-year-old son, Zabiullah. The infants are ignorant of their future fate, the shopkeeper having elected to wait until the pair are older before taking charge of the girl's upkeep. "I'm not happy to have done that, but we had nothing to eat or drink," Sabehreh told AFP.

"If this continues, we'll have to give up our three-month-old," she said, sitting by the iron cradle holding the sleeping infant, as the first chills of winter penetrated the bleak camp. Another neighbor, Gul Bibi, confirmed that many families in the camp had resorted to child marriage. Her own daughter Asho, aged eight or nine, is betrothed to a 23-year-old man to whose family Gul Bibi was indebted. The young man is away in nearby Iran, and she dreads the day of his return. "We know it's not right, but we don't have the choice," commented Hayatullah, a passer-by who overheard the mother's sad tale. — AFP



QALA I NAW: Sabehreh (right) with her daughter Zakereh, who is betrothed to the grocer's four-year-old son to cover the family's debt, sits at the Zaimat Internally Displaced People (IDP) camp in Qala-i-Naw, Badghis Province. — AFP



BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN: This handout photo released by the host broadcast, ASEAN Summit 2021 shows US President Joe Biden (center) taking part in the ASEAN-US Summit on the sidelines of the 2021 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summits held online on a live video conference in Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei. — AFP

World failing to learn lessons from COVID

BERLIN: A year-and-a-half into the coronavirus pandemic, the world has still done far too little to respond and has failed to learn from its mistakes, a global health monitor said yesterday. In a report launched in Berlin, the Global Preparedness Monitoring Board (GPMB), an independent body set up by the World Health Organization and the World Bank, slammed the continued failings in the global response to the pandemic.

"If the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic was defined by a collective failure to take preparedness seriously and act rapidly on the basis of science, the second has been marked by profound inequalities and a failure of leaders to understand our interconnectedness and act accordingly," the report said. The pandemic has exposed a world that is "unequal, divided, and unaccountable", it concluded. "The health emergency ecosystem reflects this broken world. It is not fit for purpose and needs major reform."

The report, launched at the Global Health Summit in Berlin, comes as the number of deaths from the coronavirus nears five million, according to an AFP tally of

official sources. Taking into account excess mortality directly and indirectly linked to COVID-19, the WHO estimates the overall death toll could be two to three times higher. The grim milestone approaches in the context of a sharp divide between wealthier and poorer regions in terms of vaccination rates.

'Deep shame'

World Trade Organization chief Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala pointed out earlier this month that, of more than six billion vaccine doses administered worldwide, only 1.4 percent of people in poor countries have been fully vaccinated. "Scientific advancement during COVID-19, particularly speed of vaccine development, gives us just cause for pride," GPMB co-chair Elhadj As Sy said in his foreword to the report. "However, we must feel deep shame over multiple tragedies—vaccine hoarding, the devastating oxygen shortages in low-income countries, the generation of children deprived of education, the shattering of fragile economies and health systems."

He also said that the millions of deaths from the pandemic was "neither normal nor acceptable". "Sadly, there is scant evidence that we are learning the right lessons from this pandemic. Thousands continue to die every day, yet many talk and act as if the pandemic is over," he said. In a 2020 report, the GPMB said the pandemic had already revealed how little the world had focused on preparing for such disasters, despite ample warnings that large disease outbreaks were inevitable. — AFP

News in brief

Man kills 7 in knife rampage

BEIJING: Police in central China were hunting yesterday for a man who killed seven people including a village Communist Party chief before jumping off a bridge, officers said. The suspect, surnamed Gao, stabbed to death a family of five including two children in Wuhan on Sunday, the city's police force said in a statement on its official Weibo microblog. He fatally wounded a passer-by and a cab driver while trying to steal a car to escape, it added, saying he then jumped off a bridge over the Yangtze River early Monday morning. The force did not say whether the man was thought to have survived the jump. — AFP

US shooting leaves 2 dead

LOS ANGELES: Two people were killed Monday and four others were injured - including a police officer - when a gunman opened fire in a shopping mall in the US state of Idaho. Police in Boise were called to the mall with reports "that at least one person was shot and down," the city's police chief Ryan Lee told reporters. They exchanged fire with a man matching the description 911 callers had given, with one officer being hit. A suspect was taken into custody and there is "no ongoing threat or danger to the community at large from this incident," Lee said. — AFP

Egypt lifts state of emergency

CAIRO: Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi on Monday announced the lifting of the state of emergency in place since deadly jihadist attacks on Coptic Christian churches more than four years ago. The North African country has been under a state of emergency since April 2017 bombings of two Coptic churches by an Islamic State group affiliate that killed more than 40 people. Coptic Christians account for around 10 percent of Egypt's population. "Egypt has become, thanks to its great people and its loyal men, an oasis of security and stability in the region," Sisi said on Facebook. "This is why I decided to cancel the renewal of the state of emergency throughout the country," he added. — AFP

Tehran suffering worst drought

TEHRAN: Iran's capital is suffering its worst drought in half a century, a water resources official said yesterday, citing a 97 percent drop in monthly rainfall compared with last year. Tehran has had 0.4 millimeters of rain since September 23, compared with 14.3 mm over the same period in 2020, said Mohammad Shahriari, deputy director of the company that supplies the region. "Groundwater and surface water are at a critical state and there has not been a similar drought for the past 50 years," he was quoted as saying by Iran's ISNA news agency. — AFP

Russian hackers behind attacks

WASHINGTON: The state-backed Russian hacking group that carried out last year's massive SolarWinds cyberattacks is behind a new and ongoing assault against US and European targets, Microsoft said Monday. The software giant's Threat Intelligence Center (MSTIC) said in a blog post that the Nobelium group was attempting to gain access to customers of cloud computing services and other IT service providers to infiltrate "the governments, think tanks, and other companies they serve". Describing the cyberattack as "nation-state activity", MSTIC said it "shares the hallmarks" of the assault on SolarWinds, a Texas-based software company targeted as its 300,000-strong customer base gave the hackers access to a huge number of companies. — AFP