

International

Syria's COVID spike sees hospitals reach capacity

Russia raids kill 11 pro-Turkish fighters in Syria

DAMASCUS: Hospitals in the Syrian capital Damascus and the coastal province of Latakia have reached capacity due to rising coronavirus admissions, a health official said yesterday. "We have started transferring COVID-19 patients from the province of Damascus to the (central) province of Homs, and from Latakia to the province of Tartus," Tawfiq Hasaba, a health ministry official, was quoted as saying by Syrian state TV.

The move came after "hospitals in these areas reached capacity because of a large spike in coronavirus cases," he added. Syria on Saturday logged 442 new coronavirus infections in government-held areas—a new daily record for a conflict-hit country that has documented more than 32,580 cases, including 2,198 deaths in regime-controlled territory, since the start of its outbreak last year. "It is the first time the number of cases reaches 400" in one day, Hasaba said, adding that the number of new infections was highest in Damascus, Aleppo and Latakia.

Coronavirus cases have been on the rise across Syria since mid-August, including in the northwest and northeast, large parts of which fall beyond government control. According to the World Health Organization, only two percent of Syria's population has been at least partially vaccinated. Syria's conflict has since 2011 killed nearly half a million people and ravaged a healthcare sector struggling to cope

with a mass outflux of professionals. Around 70 percent of the country's pre-war medical staff have left since the start of the war.

Russia raids kill 11

In another development, at least 11 fighters from a pro-Turkish rebel group were killed yesterday in Russian air raids in northern Syria, a war monitor said yesterday. The strikes hit a school used as a "military base" by the Al-Hamza Division outside the north Syria town of Afrin which has been under the control of Turkey and its Syrian rebel proxies since 2018, said the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. "Eleven fighters were killed and another 13 were wounded in the Russian strikes," said the monitor, which relies on a network of sources inside Syria.

It said the death toll could climb further amid ongoing efforts to pull victims from the rubble.

Observatory head Rami Abdul Rahman said such Russian raids are rare in this region of Syria, which has been controlled by Turkey and its Syrian rebel allies for three years. A Russian raid outside Afrin last month targeted a position of Faylaq al-Sham, another Turkey-backed rebel group, he said. A spokesperson for the National Army, a coalition of Turkey-backed rebel groups, called yesterday's attack a "clear message from Russia" to Turkey, showing that there are no "red lines".

Only 2% of Syria's population has been vaccinated



RAQQA: Syrian students walking to school are seen through a shattered glass in the northern city of Raqqa. —AFP

Turkey supports Syrian rebel forces battling President Bashar Al-Assad's government and it has also launched multiple operations across Syria's northern border against Kurdish forces and against the Islamic State group. Russia, on the other hand, is a staunch supporter of the Syrian regime and has

intervened militarily in support of Assad since 2015. Although they back opposite sides, Ankara and Moscow have worked together to broker several ceasefire deals in Syria's northwest, including a 2020 truce agreement in the Idlib region, the country's last major opposition bastion. —AFP

China warns of 'grim' situation with Taiwan

TAIPEI: Chinese President Xi Jinping warned that relations between Beijing and Taipei were "grim" yesterday, urging the island's main opposition party to help seek "unification of the country." China views self-ruled democratic Taiwan as part of its territory and vows to retake it one day, by force if necessary. Xi has become the most belligerent leader since Mao Zedong, describing the seizure of the island as "inevitable."

In a congratulatory letter to Eric Chu - the newly elected leader of the Beijing-friendly Kuomintang (KMT) party - Xi said the Chinese Communist Party and the KMT should collaborate under a "shared political basis." "In the past our two parties insisted on '1992 consensus' and opposing 'Taiwan independence' ... to promote peaceful developments in cross-strait relations," Xi said in the letter released by the KMT. "At

present the situation in the Taiwan Strait is complex and grim," he said, urging the parties to jointly seek peace and "the unification of the country."

Ties between Taiwan and China improved markedly under former president Ma Ying-jeou of the KMT between 2008 and 2016, culminating with a landmark meeting between Xi and him in Singapore in 2015. The KMT has side-stepped frictions with China by accepting the so-called 1992 consensus - a tacit agreement that there is only "one China" without specifying whether Beijing or Taipei is its rightful representative. In response, Chu said in a letter to Xi that the two sides should "seek common ground and respect their differences" to promote peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.

Beijing has stepped up military, diplomatic and economic pressure on Taiwan since the 2016 election of President Tsai Ing-wen, who views the island as a sovereign nation and not part of "one China." Last year, Chinese military jets made a record 380 incursions into Taiwan's defense zone, with some analysts warning that tensions between the two sides were at their highest since the mid-1990s. On Thursday, China flew 24 warplanes



TAIPEI: Eric Chu (center), Taiwan's newly-elected main opposition Kuomintang (KMT) chairman, poses with supporters following his election victory for the party's leadership at the KMT headquarters in Taipei yesterday. —AFP

including two nuclear-capable bombers into Taiwan's air defense zone, the biggest incursion in weeks, after voicing its opposition to Taipei joining a major trans-Pacific trade deal. —AFP

North Macedonia holds first high-stakes census, first in 20 years

SKOPJE: Since early September Ilna Dimitrijevska has been walking endless kilometers every day, going door to door asking people to take part in North Macedonia's first census in nearly two decades. Her task may be straightforward enough, but the census remains highly sensitive due to the potential impact on the nation's minorities. In this small Balkan country - which gained independence in 1991 following the break-up of the former Yugoslavia and came close to civil war in 2001 - the long postponed census is far from being a mere statistical operation.

Special rights such as the language used in official correspondence between the state and a citizen or ethnic quotas for public administration jobs depend on a minority being officially shown to make up at least 20 percent of the population. Out of a population of around two million people, 64 percent were Macedonians and 25 percent ethnic Albanians, according to the last census. Turks, Roma, Serbs

and other minorities made up the remainder.

In the Ilinden municipality close to the capital Skopje where Dimitrijevska has been pounding the pavements, the majority of the population is Macedonian. After checking people's identity the young woman interviews them and continues on to the next household. "It is going on very well here, no enumerators were refused" by residents, she said. "There were a few households where we had to return several times, but now all is done."

The census in the European Union-aspirant country is supposed to be held every 10 years. The last one, however, took place in 2002, just a year after an armed conflict between ethnic Albanian rebels and government forces which only ended through the intervention of the international community. A peace deal granted greater rights to the ethnic Albanian minority which had complained of discrimination and limited opportunities and representation. The census scheduled for 2011 fell victim to political disputes and mistrust with both sides saying the other would manipulate the result.

Last chance

Since the last census, the population is believed to have shrunk to around 1.6 to 1.7 million due to mass emigration, experts estimate, stoking fears

that lower numbers could jeopardise rights. "If this census does not succeed, there is no chance to make people open their doors next time," Xhelal Jakupi, of a census commission in Saraj mostly by ethnic Albanians, the process is going smoothly for now. —AFP



SKOPJE: A member of the census commission (left) leaves after she conducted an inventory of a citizen in the municipality of Ilinden near Skopje, during the North Macedonia's first census in nearly two decades. —AFP

teachers pressure children, saying they expect them to be vaccinated," she told Oe24 TV news channel last week. "As a mother, I have to decide on the limits... This is my child and I protect my child," she added.

Isolated from peers

Unlike other European countries such as Germany where at-home schooling has been illegal since 1919 and presence in school is mandatory, Austrian parents only need to inform authorities in writing to deregister their children. Education Minister Heinz Fassmann admits that the rise in homeschooling worries him, especially the impact on youngsters no longer learning with others of their own age in a classroom. "I hope it is just a wave that comes and goes," he said.

His ministry plans to require parents considering homeschooling to attend a meeting to ensure they are fully aware of what it entails. It also wants homeschoolers to sit standard exams twice yearly, rather than just the current end-of-year ones. But Evelyn Kometter, of the National Parents' Association, says more support should be available for homeschoolers and their parents who "don't feel their arguments are taken seriously." "The increasing number of parents taking their kids out of school should alert society," she said in a statement to AFP. —AFP

Austria's anti-virus measures fuel rise in homeschooling

VIENNA: Father-of-two Shkelqim Kameni took his children out of school because of Austria's strict COVID testing for pupils and his opposition to the vaccine. The 28-year-old shop manager from the western city of Salzburg is among a sharp rise in parents opting to homeschool instead. Even weeks before the new school year started this month, the divisive issue garnered media coverage and has provoked heated exchanges online between parents.

Speaking to AFP at an anti-vaccine demonstration, Kameni said he was afraid that rigorous COVID testing created too much pressure in the classroom. "Probably a child (who tests positive) will be mobbed... it's psychological abuse of children: it's child abuse," he said at the rally in downtown Vienna this month, attended by thousands. More than 7,500 children have been withdrawn from school for this academic year, the education ministry says.

News in brief

2 inmates dead in Iran jail

TEHRAN: Iranian prison authorities confirmed the deaths of two inmates within a week at a jail south of the capital and opened investigations into the circumstances. "A committee has been set up to probe the death of Amir-Hossein Hatami in Grand Tehran prison," penitentiary authorities in the capital announced in a brief statement issued late Saturday. The Ghanoun newspaper said Hatami was a 22-year-old who worked in Tehran bazaar and had been arrested after getting into a fight. On Thursday, the chief of Iran's prisons, Mohammad-Mehdi Hadj-Mohammadi, ordered an investigation into the death of Chahine Nasser, another inmate of Grand Tehran, located some 30 kilometers from the capital. Hadj-Mohammadi last month acknowledged cases of "unacceptable behavior" after footage of prison guards beating and mistreating detainees was reportedly obtained by hackers who accessed surveillance cameras at Tehran's Evin prison. —AFP

UK probe teacher's murder

LONDON: Police in Britain investigating the murder of Sabina Nessa, a teacher who was found dead in a southeast London park last weekend, said they arrested a 38-year-old man yesterday. Primary school teacher Nessa, 28, was killed after leaving her home to go to a bar just a five-minute walk away, in the latest case to galvanize public concern about women's safety in the UK. Detectives from London's Metropolitan Police took the suspect into custody in the early hours of Sunday at an address in East Sussex, a county southeast of the British capital. Detective Chief Inspector Neil John, from the Met's specialist crime command, called the arrest a "significant development". Two other men arrested this week on suspicion of murder have been released pending further investigation. Hundreds of people held a vigil on Friday evening in the southeast London neighborhood of Kidbrooke, where Nessa lived and her body was discovered last Saturday. —AFP

50 killed in Yemen's Marib

DUBAI: At least 50 Houthi rebels and Yemeni pro-government troops have been killed as fighting intensifies for the city of Marib, a key battleground of the seven-year conflict, military sources said yesterday. Hundreds of fighters have died this month alone after the Iran-backed rebels renewed their campaign for Marib, the government's last stronghold in the oil-rich north. "In the past 48 hours, 43 Houthi fighters were killed, mostly in coalition airstrikes" west of Marib, a military source told AFP, while another source said at least seven loyalists died in fighting. The rebels rarely announce their casualties. About 400 people have been reported dead in clashes in September for the northern city, following a lull in fighting in the region. The Houthis initially escalated their efforts to seize Marib in February, hoping to gain control of the strategically vital city and the region's oil resources. —AFP



TAEZ, Yemen: A man walks past shops that have been closed as part of a wider strike by merchants in protest against deteriorating economic and living conditions due to the prolonged state of conflict, in Yemen's third city of Taez. —AFP