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Tuesday, 29 December 2020

Myanmar launches National Strategic Plan for Youth Policy (2020-2024)

THE Government revealed the National Strategic Plan for Youth Policy (2020-2024) with the virtual event hosted at the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement in Nay Pyi Taw yesterday morning.

State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi delivered a video message to the event.

(The speech of State Counsellor is covered on page-3)

Union Minister for Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement Dr Win Myat Aye, who is the Chairman of Myanmar Youth Affairs Committee, made a report on the policy's implementation plan at various levels in cooperation with ministries, local and international organizations and monitoring processes in the progress of policy.

He added that the policy aims for the participation of all young people in development works, overcoming chal-

lenges including COVID-19 crisis in the implementation, while striving for lasting peace and development goals with steadfast efforts.

Union Minister for Health and Sports Dr Myint Htwe, in his capacity as the Vice-Chairman of the committee, said that the strategic plan is a right way leading to fulfil the expectation of young people by setting the goals.

He also urged all the committee members to prepare for their plans in participating in the strategic plan while the young people need to have a clear vision and fair view in creating the future of the country.

Dr Myint Htwe also highlighted the importance of the strategic plan and the need for capacity building dialogues for the plan, developing suitable strategies at the respective regions and states.

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State Counsellor
Daw Aung San Suu
Kyi delivers a video
message to the
Launching Ceremony
of National Strategic
Plan for Youth
Policy (2020-2024)
on 28 December
2020. PHOTO: MNA



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"People are the key"

Myanmar launches National Strategic Plan for Youth Policy (2020-2024)



Union Minister Dr Win Myat Aye presents the National Strategic Plan for Youth Policy 2020-2024 to a member of Myanmar Youth Affairs Committee on 28 December 2020. **PHOTO: MNA**

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He also recommended conducting a minor evaluation on the implementation of strategy every six months and the sector-wide review every two years.

Union Minister for Education Dr Myo Thein Gyi, Vice-Chairman of the committee, said that his ministry would work together with relevant ministries and respective organizations in implementing the policy.

He remarked that the national strategy is aimed at promoting the future and dignity of ethnic youth, as well as the image of the country.

Dr Myo Thein Gyi added the need for close cooperation among the young people in promoting their lives and carrying out the

key performance indicators in the process.

After UNFPA Representative for Myanmar Mr Ramanathan Balakrishnan made a speech, the Union Ministers handed over the National Strategic Plan for Youth Policy (2020-2024) to the members of Myanmar Youth Affairs Committee.

The event was concluded with screening the documentary video clip on drafting the National Strategic Plan for Youth Policy (2020-2024).

The virtual event also participated by the permanent secretaries, departmental heads, chairpersons, vice-chairpersons, secretaries and members of Nay Pyi Taw and Region/State Youth Affairs committees.—MNA

(Translated by Aung Khin)

Firework displays to mark 73rd Independence Day

THE firework displays will take place at 7 pm on the right side of entrance to the Presidential Palace and at 7:05 pm near the Gate

1 of Water Fountain Garden to celebrate the 73rd Independence Day of Myanmar on 4 January 2021. Rehearsals of the events

will be conducted at the same places and times on 3 January. —MNA*(Translated by Aung Khin)*

Myanmar citizens, seamen return home from abroad by relief flights

A total of 172 Myanmar citizens who wanted to return home from Jordan arrived in Yangon yesterday morning by a MAI relief flight organized by the Myanmar Embassy in Tel Aviv.

Moreover, 138 Myanmar seamen were brought back home by another relief flight of MAI, organized by the Myanmar Embassy in Seoul and

the Myanmar Seafarers' Employment Services Federation in the evening.

The Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population, the Ministry of Health and Sports and the Yangon Region government arranged 7-day quarantine at specific places or designated hotels, followed by the 7-day home quarantine.

To bring back the Myanmar seamen and citizens in accordance with the instructions from National-Level Central Committee on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is working together with the relevant ministries, Myanmar embassies from respective countries and shipping companies.—MNA

Malaysia donates N95 masks to support national COVID-19 response of Myanmar

A handover ceremony of the first batch of 20,000 N95 masks, donated by the Government of Malaysia to the Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, took place at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Yangon at 3 pm on 28 December 2020. This donation aims to support Myanmar's efforts of prevention, control and treatment measures against the COVID-19 global pandemic.

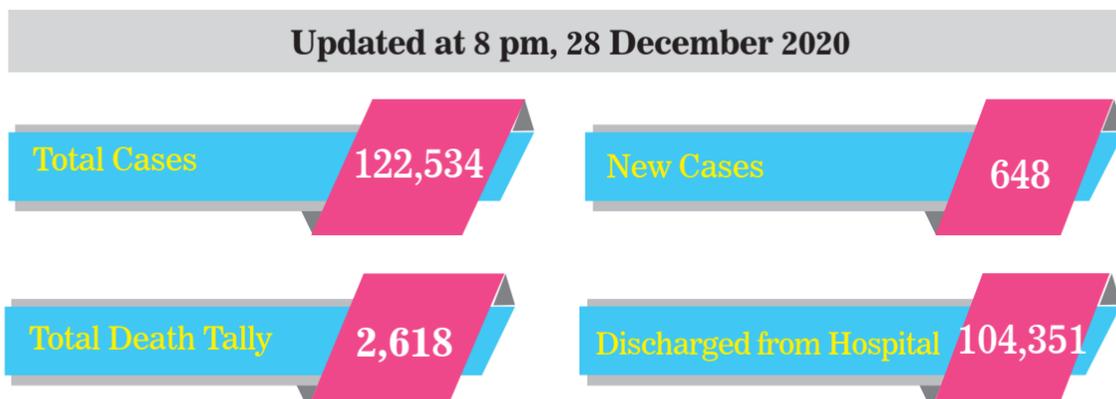
Mr Muhammad Syukri Azmi, Charge d'Affaires, a.i. of the Embassy of Malaysia presented the items to U Aung Myint, Director-General of the Strategic Studies and Training Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Afterwards, the Director-General returned a letter of appreciation to the Charge d'Affaires, a.i.

Also present on the occasion were senior officials from the Ministry, representatives from the Embassy of Malaysia, Mercy Malaysia, Myanmar Airways International and Myanmar-Malaysia Business Chamber.

Subsequently, the Ministry will hand over the N95 masks to the Ministry of Health and Sports.—MNA

648 new cases of COVID-19 reported on 28 December, total figure rises to 122,534

MYANMAR'S COVID-19 positive cases rose to 122,534 after 648 new cases were reported on 28 December according to the Ministry of Health and Sports. Among these 122,534 confirmed cases, 2,618 died, 104,351 have been discharged from hospitals.—MNA



Ministry of Health and Sports

Strive for development with united strength

All our ethnic national brothers and sisters need to strive with united strength based on national unity for the success of the peace process, for overcoming the various steps of the democratic transition process, for democracy to take firm root and for it to develop, progress and endure.

(Extract from the Message of Greetings sent by President U Win Myint on 4 January 2020 on the occasion of the 72nd Anniversary of Independence Day.)



Landscape of Bagan Cultural Heritage Zone. PHOTO BY: TUN TUN THEIN

State Counsellor's video message to launching ceremony of National Strategic Plan for Youth Policy (2020-2024)

LET me extend my good wishes and metta to all the distinguished guests and youths from all over the country who are attending today's online event for launching the Myanmar National Strategic Plan for Youth Policy (2020 - 2024).

Today's event is being conducted online due to the challenge of COVID-19. Since more youths are using online services, we could consider this as a good opportunity and advantage.

Let me say first of all how grateful and proud I am for all the volunteers from various organizations and all the youths who are joining in actively to support the COVID-19 prevention, control and treatment activities regardless of whatever tasks they have been assigned to perform.

At this time the fact that we are facing the difficulties arising out of the COVID-19 pandemic by helping each other with empathy and understanding is a testimony that there exists a community in our country capable of helping each other, depending upon each other and trusting each other. I trust that youths will carry on these good traditions.

Natural resources exist in every country more or less. Although it took years for these natural resources to come into being, it is very easy and takes very little time to extract and use them. That is why each and every country has begun drawing up advance plans for the sustainable use of these natural resources. At the same time, they have come to understand and accept the fact that only human resources are a limitless resource. They are, therefore exerting great

efforts and using all kinds of ways and means to develop human resources. It is the same for our country. In striving for the goal of national development, we need to adopt systematic plans for the sustainable use of our limited natural resources. For sustainable national development, we need to develop and upgrade the human resources of our citizens on a continuous basis. At a fundamental level, what we can depend on are our youths.

We need to nurture our youths so that each young person not only has knowledge and skills but is also highly qualified and capable of independent and deep thinking. As we train and nurture these youths, we must strive to ensure that they are imbued with qualities such as understanding and caring for each other, forbearance and forgiveness, willingness to sacrifice, and capable of being a team player; these qualities should be embedded deep in their hearts. Furthermore, they should be capable of exerting strenuous efforts with determination and indomitable spirit when faced with difficulties till the goal is successfully reached.

For the development and advancement of a country, the Union Government and the entire people, including the youths, must all join hands and work together. Just as youths and middle-aged people comprise the main labour force of a country, the youths of today will become the middle-age and elderly segment of the population and as such will have to shoulder heavy responsibilities. Therefore to the extent that we are able to nurture our youths to be highly skilled and competent, we would have fully qualified professionals, entrepreneurs, and

workforces capable of working for the interest of the country not only for the present but also for the future. That is why it is necessary to use all kinds of methods for the physical and mental development of our youths; at the same time, it is very important to nurture our children who will soon become youths at an early age for their physical and mental development.

Youths of today have many opportunities because of new technologies and changes in the political landscape of the world. At the same time, they have to face many difficulties and challenges. They are facing climate change, conflicts born out of extremism within communities lacking social harmony and pandemics such as COVID-19 which emerge unexpectedly. Furthermore, another challenge that the youths are facing is the migration for work.

To confront and solve the above difficulties and challenges, our country has drafted and adopted the youth affairs policy; to practically implement this policy we have launched the National Strategic Plan for Youth Policy (2020-2024) today. Implementation of this policy is aimed for youths to play a major role in striving for the emergence of a Democratic Federal Union with multi-sectoral development that meets international standards which is essential for the young generations.

If we look at how populations have changed and developed, it may be seen that the number of youths has exceeded that of other age levels in most of the developing countries. I wish to urge the ministries, departments, investors and all youths to work towards taking advantage of this opportunity.

Creating employment opportunities and promoting the education sector plays a crucial role in the effective use of youth power for the development of a country. The government also needs to nurture and develop the youths so that they become human resources capable of independent thinking, and assessment, and are highly productive. Youths should also develop their capacity depending on the emerging situations and opportunities as our country being a developing country has limited resources.

Easier and faster access to information about global issues and technologies compared to previous times is an important opportunity. There are now many websites to study courses of the world's top universities free of charge, and there are many opportunities to learn any subject or skill in great depth. A certain level of the English language proficiency is required to study the courses as most of them are conducted in English. However, free courses for learning English are available on many websites and YouTube channels. I wish to urge youths to use the internet not only to spend time on social networks and games but also for their personal capacity building.

At present, the world countries, including Myanmar, are putting emphasis on measures to prevent the collapse of their respective economies due to the impact of COVID-19. In doing so, they have started using Digital systems and other E-commerce platforms in the business sector.

Our youth needs to monitor and study changes in the global and our national economy continuously and strive to create new and relia-

ble digital platforms trusted by the public. They should also work hard to engage in new businesses on the current platforms with increased momentum to make them succeed.

I wish to urge the youths to work together with the Union government for the emergence of a digital-oriented economic market system which promotes fair and proper competition.

The young people might experience not only the advantages of technological development but also various forms of bullying and hate speech on social media. These could turn into major challenges in the long-term social and cultural sectors, causing losses in our efforts to promote peace and development. I would also like to urge youths to help each other; to have good sense and awareness in developing a social environment that supports a culture of helping each other, and equality. I urge you all to join in and collaborate to wipe out ideas that fuel hatred and words and usage that promote hatred.

In conclusion, I urge all the Union Ministries, the Union Territory Nay Pyi Taw Council, region/local governments, local/foreign NGOs and civil society organizations to practically implement the youth development programmes in the National Strategic Plan for Youth Policy (2020-2024) together with the youths in line with the present needs.

May you all enjoy the Christmas season. And also in the coming New Year may you all have good health and happiness and may all your good wishes be fulfilled.

Thank you all.
(Translated by Kyaw Myaing, Aung Khin)

MOUG holds ceremony marking its anniversary



Union Minister U Min Thu speaks during the Anniversary Event of the Ministry of Union Government Office in Nay Pyi Taw on 28 December 2020. PHOTO: MNA

A ceremony marking the second anniversary of the Ministry of the Office of the Union Government (MOUG) was held in Nay Pyi Taw yesterday morning.

Union Minister for the Office of the Union Government U Min Thu, Deputy Minister U Tin Myint, Revenue Appellate Tribunal Chairperson U Win Tin, Directors-General, Deputy Directors-General, Advisors and relevant government officials attended the ceremony. Region/State

Administrators and District Administrators, Directors, officials, award winners and former staff members also participated in the ceremony via videoconferencing.

During the ceremony, Union Minister U Min Thu said that in addition to the existing departments—the Government Affairs Department and the General Administration Department—the ministry formed the Revenue Appellate Tribunal on 1 August 2020.

He said that the government

provided financial assistance to grassroots people with no regular income during the COVID-19 crisis for a total of four times in accordance with the COVID-19 Economic Relief Plan (CERP), so a total of K568.64 billion has been provided to the grassroots people.

The Union Minister also expressed his gratitude to the ministry's officials and staff members for their COVID-19 response efforts and for carrying out necessary administrative tasks to suc-

cessfully hold the 2020 multi-party democratic general elections.

The Union Minister said that since the General Administration Department was transferred to the Ministry of the Office of the Union Government, a general administrative reform framework was drafted and implemented with the aim of establishing a people-centred administrative mechanism.

He continued that the ministry enacted the Second Amendment to Ward / Village-tract Administration Rules on 22 December 2020. He added that not only officials and staff members from the General Administration Department but also the general public need to understand the amended process for electing Ward / Village-tract Administrators. The manuals for Ward / Village-tract Administrators were prepared and distributed as the first phase of Ward / Village-tract administration reform process, according to the Union Minister;

who said that necessary training will be provided to newly-elected administrators to gain a broad understanding of the manual.

He said that the General Administration Department is a department that has direct contact with the general public, and it should be a model department that can effectively coordinate with other departments for regional development.

He urged the officials and staff members of his ministry to be ethical and free from corruption. He also urged all the officials to strive for a transparent administrative body. Speaking on the occasion of the second anniversary of the ministry, the Union Minister also called on the officials of his ministry to work together to effectively provide services to the general public. During the ceremony, the Union Minister also presented honorary medals to outstanding officials in various tasks.—MNA (Translated by Maung Maung Swe)

MoALI minister warns legal actions against illegal land use before securing permit

THE Central Farmland Management Body held its 35th coordination meeting yesterday. Union Minister for Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation Dr Aung Thu presided over the meeting and talked about legal actions against illegal land use before acquiring permits and awareness on the illegal sale of farmland for the property.

The meeting also discussed

compensation and losses for confiscated land, the establishment of the industrial garden project, applications for religious issues, construction of telecommunication towers and other uses and registration of vacant, fallow and virgin lands. He also discussed cash fine for illegal land use before securing the permit in line with Section 19 of Farmland Law. The

meeting also focussed on farmland procedure law Section 30 (A) of 34, 35 and 36, rules and regulations. The Central Farmland Management Body scrutinized the application of central bodies from Nay Pyi Taw Council and regions/states on the application of land use in accordance with the rules and laws.—MNA (Translated by Aung Khin)



Central Farmland Management Body organizes its 35th Coordination Meeting on 28 December 2020. PHOTO: MNA

MoE discusses drafting NESP (2021-2030) with UMFCCI



Union Minister Dr Myo Thein Gyi holds virtual meeting with UMFCCI over drafting NESP 2021-2030 on 28 December. PHOTO: MNA

THE Ministry of Education organized a coordination meeting with the Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry, its partnered associations and individuals from the public-private partnership to discuss drafting the National Education Strategic Plan (2021-2030) yesterday morning via videocon-

ferencing.

At the meeting, Union Minister Dr Myo Thein Gyi explained education reforms in accordance with the Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan, the Future of Education and Skills 2030 adopted by Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the OECD Learning Compass 2030

Report, the World Bank and the report of UNESCO.

He added that reforms are aimed for developing an education system without any discrimination and with opportunities for life-long learning, the nature of mankind and cooperation, accountability and creation, research development, the public-private partnership between the schools and industries. The Union Minister also discussed the levels of education under the national education standard framework, cooperation between public schools and private schools and organizations for life-long learning, the need of high-level skill for ensuring quality products and services in line with the changing technologies, laws and regulations.

He also remarked that the

private sector should establish organizations to support formal education, vocational education, higher-level education and research, while programmes for reskilling, upskilling and continuous professional development are required for new employees.

The Union Minister also highlighted the importance of basic research, applied research, public-private sector, university-industry partner relations technology transfers and intellectual property right, the blended learning comprised with high-tech learning and high-touch learning, and credit transfer system in switching levels under the National Qualifications Framework. He continued to say the phase 2 of NESP is designed to promote skills of ethnic young persons for

their future employment opportunities.

The permanent secretary and directors-general of the ministry discussed the respective sectors. The NESP (2021-2030) includes success and challenges of the previous phase, its goals, education for economic development, basic education, technology, vocational and training, higher education, research, innovation, management, cooperation, capacity building and quality guarantees, while the topics also cover enrolment opportunities at different levels of education, curriculum, teaching-learning, evaluation, management and quality guarantees, finance and international partnered associations.—MNA

(Translated by Aung Khin)

Our economic engine to start moving again ...



What I wish to say is that we might have to carry out vaccination programmes in places where economic recovery has been achieved, if we find this to be necessary. The reason is that it is extremely important for our economic engine to start moving again. At this time, in places where economic activity can be resumed, what I wish to say is that in places where COVID containment efforts have been successful, we might be able to provide vaccines earlier. This is a possibility. We will do these things in a fair manner. Everyone will get the vaccine. However, when will we get the vaccines and who will be given priority, these things will be done in accordance with the needs of the country; it also depends on our ability to cope with these tasks. These will have to be decided.

(Excerpt from State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's report on COVID-19 containment measures, on 12 December 2020)

Union Minister Dr Myo Thein Gyi delivers speech at earth sciences conference

THE 4th Myanmar National Conference on Earth Sciences (MNCES, 2020) was hosted at Toungoo University yesterday morning via videoconferencing.

The conference was participated by Union Minister for Education Dr Myo Thein Gyi, Deputy Minister for Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation Dr Ye Myint Swe, the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Education, the Deputy Permanent Secretary, Directors-General, Rectors, Professors, the Myanmar Geosciences Society Chairperson, researchers and guests.

During the conference, the Union Minister said that people are facing greater challenges of natural disasters with the benefits of technological advancement.

The theme of the 4th Myanmar National Conference on Earth Sciences is "Exploring the information of geology and earth sciences through comprehensive research towards the sustainable development of our unique environment."

The Union Minister said that the numbers of research papers

submitted to Myanmar National Conferences on Earth Sciences have been increasing year by year: 103 research papers were submitted in 2017; 184 papers in 2018; and 177 papers in 2019. A total of 240 papers will be submitted in the MNCES-2020.

The research papers focus on the exploration of natural resources aimed for social development, systematic extraction and uses of natural resources, technologies for minimizing the impacts on the natural environment, and sustainable development.

He called on the researchers to effectively work together to improve research results and exchange views with international universities.

At present, the Ministry of Education has encouraged Myanmar universities to collaborate with experts and international science organizations such as the ASEAN University Network, the Erasmus + University Network in order to build the capacity of teachers and students. He said that the lifeblood of the world is the 17 Sustainable Development



Union Minister Dr Myo Thein Gyi delivers the speech to the 4th Myanmar National Conference on Earth Sciences via videoconferencing on 28 December 2020. **PHOTO: MNA**

Goals (SDGs), and SDG-6 "Clean Water and Sanitation", SDG-7 "Affordable and Clean Energy", "SDG-11 Sustainable Cities and Communities", SDG-13 "Climate Action", SDG-14 "Life Below Water", SDG-15 "Life on Land" are

closely related to the Conference on Earth Sciences. In his closing speech, the Union Minister called on researchers to carry out quality research that will be practical, effective, transparent and in line with the Myanmar Sustainable

Development Plan (2018-2030).

The 4th Myanmar National Conference on Earth Sciences has been held from 28-29 December.—MNA

(Translated by Maung Maung Swe)

9th Political Consultations between Myanmar and Viet Nam held via videoconference



Myanmar and Viet Nam hold 9th Political Consultations via videoconferencing on 28 December 2020. **PHOTO: MNA**

THE 9th Political Consultations between the Republic of the Union of Myanmar and the Socialist

Republic of Viet Nam was held at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Nay Pyi Taw, at 9:30 am on 28

December 2020 via videoconference.

U Hau Do Suan, Deputy Minister for International Cooperation of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar and Mr Nguyen Quoc Dung, Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam co-chaired the meeting. Present at the Consultations were U Kyaw Soe Win, Myanmar Ambassador to Viet Nam, Mr Ly Quoc Tuan, Vietnamese Ambassador to Myanmar, senior officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Ministry of Investment and

Foreign Economic Relations, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation, the Ministry of Electricity and Energy of Myanmar and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Viet Nam.

At the Consultations, both sides cordially discussed and exchanged view on the matters pertaining to the further consolidation of the existing friendly relations between the two countries, latest developments in Myanmar and Viet Nam, developments in Rakhine State, national reconciliation and peace processes of Myanmar, bilateral

cooperation in various sectors including trade and investment, energy and mining, telecommunications, education, tourism, culture, agriculture, livestock, irrigation and forestry. Both sides also touched on a wide range of issues including the possibility of elevating the comprehensive partnership relationship to a strategic partnership level, exchange of high level visits in the coming year, to strengthen collaboration in regional arena such as ASEAN, CLMV, ACMECS and other Mekong sub-region initiatives and multilateral fora including the UN.—MNA

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Traders request MoC to prosecute Chinese businessperson for K10.6 bln fraud

By Nyein Nyein

FIVE Myanmar traders have filed a fraud case of a Chinese citizen who scammed over K10.6 billion from rice traders to the Ministry of Commerce to proceed to prosecution, said Vice-Chair U Min Thein of Muse rice wholesale centre.

"Five traders reported their cases to Muse rice wholesale centre office on 18 December 2020. The centre forwarded this report to the Ministry of Commerce, after fulfilling the

needs. The prosecution will be undertaken through diplomatic missions," he affirmed.

A Chinese citizen identified Luo Jianfang (aka) Luo Laoban from Hubei Province of China cheated K2.6 billion from Myanmar traders and K8 billion from the traders based in Ruili, China in November-end. He scammed over K10.6 billion and fled.

Consequently, efforts are underway to abolish credit transaction system in rice trade with China and cash transaction will be conducted later. It will

avoid financial scams, credit risks and save unnecessary loss. "Additionally, the related institutions will monitor the trading to prevent from such kind of cases, he added.

At present, merchants in Muse are accustomed to the credit transaction. Cash transaction will secure payment on the trade deal. Myanmar's traders also need to work together on it, Muse rice wholesale centre stated.

The fraud case has not affected the rice trade through the

Muse border. The business is still continued, and about 30,000 rice bags are daily traded.

Thus, the Myanmar Rice Federation notified the traders to enter into a firm contract and strictly adhere to trade regulations. Myanmar Companies which have difficulties in entering into a firm contract and complying with regulations can contact the federation or Muse rice wholesale centre, MRF released a notification on 27 November.

(Translated by Ei Myat Mon)

Pansodan-Dala ferry increases rush-hour services on 28 December



A vessel plying between Pansodan and Dala is seen in Yangon River. PHOTO: NAING LIN KYAW (DALA)

YANGON Pansodan-Dala ferry service increased the schedule times to 34 rounds on 28 December to facilitate the passengers' transport and avoid the unnecessary crowd during rush hour.

With the coronavirus cases mounting in Yangon Region, ferry service reduced to 16 rounds during the stay-at-home period. Some workplaces restarted in line with the COVID-19 health guidelines, and consequently, the ferry commuters have risen.

Manager U Kyaw Htoo

Aung for the Inland Water Transport (Delta Division) stated that commuters are not regular. We saw a steady uptick in recent days. The current move is aimed to contain the spread of COVID-19 among the commuters. We still do not see the rapid growth of the commuters until now.

Starting from 28 December 2020, Dala ferry runs 34 rounds between 5:30 am and 8:30 pm in the weekdays, and it plies the routes for 22 rounds between 6 am and 8 pm every weekend.

At present, there are about 7,000 commuters during weekends. In the weekdays, the number of commuters is slowly rising to 11,000.

Before the pandemic, the ferry service run 46 times a day. The Yangon Pansodan-Dala ferries were earlier packed with nearly 30,000 daily commuters.

The relevant health departments and philanthropic organizations are raising awareness for COVID-19 at the terminal. The Ministry of Health and Sports has warned the public

to follow the COVID-19 guidelines strictly.

The Pansodan-Dala ferry is an only transport option for the local people in southern Yangon -- Dala, Twantay, Kawhmu, Kungyangon townships to link with commercial hub Yangon. Three ferry boats named Cherry 1, 2 and 3 donated by Japan earlier ran 46 times a day for approximately 30,000 commuters. It is one of the crowded places in the city, generating revenues. —Naing Lin Kyaw (Dala)

(Translated by Ei Myat Mon)

MUSIC

Mexican songwriter Armando Manzanero dies of Covid aged 86



(FILES) In this file photo taken on July 15, 2018, Mexican singer and composer Armando Manzanero performs during his show in Havana. PHOTO: AFP

MEXICAN singer-songwriter Armando Manzanero died Monday at the age of 86 after being hospitalized with the coronavirus, sparking an outpouring of tributes for one of the country's best-loved musicians.

The composer of romantic Latin ballads, who became the first Mexican to receive a Grammy lifetime achievement award in 2014, suffered a cardiac arrest, his publicist told AFP. Manzanero's songs are known across Latin America and have been covered or adapted by international stars including Frank Sinatra, Christina Aguilera, Andrea Bocelli and Elvis Presley.

The artist was admitted to hospital on December 17 and later intubated, although news from his entourage over the weekend that his health was improving had sparked hope that he would beat the virus.

A visibly moved President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador cut short his daily news conference on Monday after showing a video of Manzanero performing one of his best-known songs, "Adoro".

He hailed the musician, who also received a Latin Grammy lifetime achievement award in 2010, as "a great composer, one of the best in the country."

Manzanero was born in the southeastern city of Merida on December 7, 1934, although his birth was only registered a year later.

He recorded around 30 albums and some 400 songs over a career spanning six decades.

The songwriter, who was proud of his indigenous Mayan roots and known for his elegant suits, married five times and had seven children.

Mexico has registered more than 122,000 coronavirus deaths -- the world's fourth highest toll after the United States, Brazil and India.

SOURCE: AFP

FILM

Bangladesh director charged after film depiction of police angers force

A Bangladeshi film director has been arrested and charged after a scene depicting police harshly interrogating a rape victim and highlighting attitudes towards violence against women in the conservative nation sparked the ire of the force.

The first half of "Nabab LLB", a fictional courtroom drama about rape and the treatment of victims starring megastar Shakib Khan, was released on a local streaming service in mid-December.

The scene from the movie directed by Anonno Mamun went viral on social media last week, with criticism directed at police over their handling of the case.

It angered the force, with Mamun, 34, and the actor who played the policeman, 46-year-old Shaheen Mridha, arrested on Friday.

"The officer was interrogating her using very offensive gestures and obscene language which is the opposite of healthy entertainment and will create negative perceptions about policing among the public," Dhaka Metropolitan Police said on their news portal.

The statement added that the pair were arrested "for making and acting in a film containing such offensive and obscene dialogue".

They faced court on Friday and were charged with "making a film with pornographic

content" over a different scene depicting the sexual assault, police added.

Officers said they were also seeking to arrest Orchita Sporsia, the 27-year-old actress who played the rape victim.

A senior police officer told AFP Saturday that the film "insulted the entire force".

"The plot is completely fabricated and unpleasant. It is based on total falsehood," the officer, who asked to remain anonymous, said.

The pair face up to seven years in jail if they are found guilty.

Movies are usually vetted by the country's censorship board but regulations to include streaming service offerings have yet to be finalized.

There are five local streaming platforms in Bangladesh, including recently launched iTheatre, which released "Nabab LLB". The second part of the film is due to be released in early January.

The arrests were denounced by rights activists, who said the film accurately depicted the struggles rape victims face in Bangladesh's legal system.

"These arrests are nothing new but the continuation of attacks on artistic freedom," activist Rezaur Rahman Lenin told AFP.

SOURCE: AFP

ANIMATED MOVIE

"Demon Slayer" becomes Japan's highest-grossing film

AN animated movie based on the blockbuster "Demon Slayer" manga series has become the highest-grossing film in Japanese box-office history, its distributors said Monday, ending the reign of Hayao Miyazaki's "Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi" (Spirited Away) from 2001.

The film, a tale of an adolescent boy fighting human-eating demons, amassed as of Sunday 32.47 billion yen (\$313 million) and drew more than 24 million to theaters since its opening on Oct. 16, according to co-distributors Aniplex Inc. and Toho Co.

Despite the coronavirus pandemic limiting cinema audiences, the movie had raked in 32.12 billion yen as of Saturday, surpassing Oscar-winning director Miyazaki's film, which chalked up 31.68 billion yen in box-office sales.

Miyazaki's movie took 253 days to eclipse the 30 billion yen mark in box-office sales, but "Demon Slayer -- Kimetsu no Yaiba -- The Movie: Mugen Train" did so just in 59 days.

The movie directed by Haruo Sotozaki and the sequel to an anime television series aired in Japan last year, became the first film in the country to earn over 10 billion yen within 10 days of its premiere. It overtook "Titanic," the smash-hit 1997 American film about a romance aboard the ill-fated cruise liner of the same name, as the second-highest grossing movie ever in Japan on Nov. 30.



Supplied file photo shows a scene from "Demon Slayer -- Kimetsu no Yaiba -- The Movie: Mugen Train." PHOTO: KYODO NEWS

In mid-December, as the "Demon Slayer" movie was on track to beat the record of "Spirited Away," Toho revised the sales of Miyazaki's film from 30.8 billion yen to 31.68 billion yen by film revenues when screened again in summer.

"Demon Slayer," which is set in Japan around 100 years ago, is the tale of a boy forced to fight demons after his family is slaughtered and his younger sister Nezuko is turned into one. It is based on the manga series by Koyoharu Gotoge that was published between 2016 and earlier this year.

The manga series, now a global hit, has been translated into 14 languages and is available in 33 countries and regions, according to publisher Shueisha Inc. The movie centers on the efforts of hero Tanjiro Kamado, along with his sister and fellow demon slayers, to save the lives of passengers aboard the "Mugen

Train," named after the Japanese word for infinity, on which countless people have gone missing.

Its English-dubbed and subtitled versions will hit movie theatres in North America in early 2021, according to Aniplex. The film was shown in Taiwan on Oct. 30 and earlier this month in Thailand.

The "Demon Slayer" boom has generated an economic impact of around 270 billion yen, based on an estimate by Toshihiro Nagahama, chief economist at the Dai-Ichi Life Research Institute, earlier this month.

In another boost to the "Demon Slayer" boom, the final volume of its manga series in book form went on sale earlier this month. Shueisha said 3.95 million copies were published as the first edition of the 23rd volume, with the cumulative number for all volumes including digital sales topping 120 million copies.

SOURCE: KYODO

Denying use of farmland for other purposes without permit helping uphold rule of law

WITH higher demand for living quarters created by the increasing population, online sales of housing plots carved out on farmland is widespread across the country, highlighting the dark side of our land management efforts.

Union Minister for Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation Dr Aung Thu, in his capacity as the chairman of the Central Body of Farmland Management, has disclosed the situation on the ground at the meeting of the body recently, sending messages to the regional and state sub-bodies and authorities to take effective actions against such practices.

Those departmental officials who have the authority to manage the farmland are obliged to enforce the law effectively and settle cases without bias as they play a role in implementing the rule of law.

It is required to speed up our efforts to eliminate the unlawful use of farmland for other purposes such as carving out plots for housing on farmlands and their sale is in contravention of the Farmland Law.

The situation demands us to raise public awareness about farmland management to make clear the farmland management law among the people so that they can not fall prey to the illegal trading.

The law prohibits the utilization of farmland for other purposes, and strict actions were taken against those who violated the rules. Besides, farmland cannot be sold, pawned, or leased to foreigners without the permission of the State.

In the past, using farmland for other purposes was a common practice in Myanmar.

To effectively prevent the illegal distribution of farmland, corruption must be rooted out. Or, the situation will remain difficult for the authorities.

Those departmental officials who have the authority to manage the farmland are obliged to enforce the law effectively and settle cases without bias as they play a role in implementing the rule of law.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation; Ministry of Home Affairs; and other related municipal organisations should cooperate to ensure the regulations and procedures under the law are followed.

To put an end to illegal squatting, including settlement in forest reserves and construction of infrastructure on farmlands, three stakeholders — those who make the laws, those who enforce them, and those who are obliged to follow the laws — need to cooperate with each other.

Traditional Nat Festivals of the month Nattaw (December)

By Maha Saddhamma
Jotika dhaja
Sithu Dr Khin Maung Nyunt

THE 9th month of Myanmar lunar calendar called Nat-taw is the second month of Myanmar cold season “Hei man” in Pali meaning winter. Myanmar has three seasons, Gaiman (Summer), Wathan (Rain or Monsoon) and Heiman (Cold Season or Winter).

Though it is pronounced “Nadaw” its spelling has two words “Nat” and “Taw”. “Nat” is a derivative from Pali word “Natha” meaning “a resplendent being worthy of veneration” and “Taw” means royal or respectable. Nat generally applies to all spiritual beings, devas, gods, goddesses, and all spirits. Who deserve worship by human beings for their favour. So Nat-taw means the month for worshipping nat spirits.

According to Myanmar astrology, this month is called Danu Yathi. Zodiacal symbol of Danu is an archer with bow and arrows.

Among many orchids that bloom in this month. Thazin (Bulbophyllum auricomum) dominate sending out its soft sweet fragrance far and wide. It is listed in Royal Flowers. A special festival is held for this flower.

Before Buddhism arrived in Myanmar ancient nat worship were wide spread among Myanmar ethnic nationalities. Nat is a word derived from Pali word Natha. Natha means a resplendent being worthy of worship and propitiation by all human beings.

There are two types of Nats. Devas are living in their kingdom on and above Mt. Meru, the legendry mountain. There are six such deva kingdoms.

Nat spirits were human heroes and heroins in the civil and military services of Kings. Due to their violent deaths by assassination, execution, fatal accidents such as fatal accident snake bite, tiger bite, burnt by fire and drown in water their spirits linger, moksting human being until they get a place to rest.

They need special seasonal worship and festivals. They were given by royal order day and month of their festival and special area.

In the 37 Nats of Myanmar, Thagyar Nat comes first. But he is just Myanmar version of Sakka Deva God of Hinduisim. He is not a Nat spirit.

Only the remaining 36 are Myanmar nat spirits.

Popa Hill range is over 4,000 feet high and cold and freezing in Winter near old Bagan. It used to be a volcanic mountain several millions years ago it erupted shooting out rocks fire and lava.

There are Nat shrines on the Popa Taung Kalat near Bagan and Nat festivals are held almost every day.

The name Popa is a Pali word meaning flower. Mt Popa means Mt of Flowers.

Black Smith Maung Tint De and family Nats shrines are on the Mt Popa Range. Two pieces of Champac Tree log, higher respectfully the Elder Brother U Tint De and lower his elder sister Thone Ban Hla are found.

The Maha Giri Nats

The two brick niches at the old Tharapa Gate of old Bagan have the idols of two Maha Giri Nat spirits— the Elder Brother in the right and Younger Sister in the left niche. They tell their tragic story that happened in their birth place Tagaung, up country. Maung



A Nat shrine on Popa Taung Kalat near Bagan. PHOTO: PHOE KHWAR

Tint Dei a mighty blacksmith with his apprentices was producing all kinds of iron weapons and implements. The king of Tagaung was worried that one day the mighty blacksmith would rebel against him. He sent his warriors to arrest Maung Tint Dei who fled and remained in hiding. The king raised Tint Dei's beautiful younger sister to his queen and told her to bring him her elder brother as he would appoint him interior minister. The queen made her brother come to court. The king appointed him the interior minister.

But soon after, the king tried him to the trunk of a Saga Tree (Champac Tree) and burnt him alive to death. Upon hearing the horrible news, the queen came out and jumped into the fire to die with her elder brother. Because of their violent deaths, their spirits lived

at that Tree and they molested any being that came under the Tree. The king ordered his men to uproot the Tree and float it down the Ayeyawaddy River. The Champac Tree stranded at the Jetty of Bagan. King Theyligyaung of Bagan [344-387 A.D.] had a dream in which the two nat spirits appeared telling their tragic story and requesting the king to give them a place to rest.

The king ordered his men to cut the Champac trunk into two pieces to be carved Images of the Brother and Sister and enshrined them on the summit of Popa Mountain range. Giving them the title Min Maha Giri [Royal Nats of Great Mountain] and made a yearly festival in Nat-taw month. The court and the public paid honour and to the Images in the shrines. The two nat spirits offered their

service of guarding the capital city against all enemies.

Their Images were also enshrined at the Tharapa Gate. As Nat idol shrine was forbidden to keep in household, a green coconut with offerings was kept at every house to propitiate them as the guardian Spirits of the house. Since then a yearly festival is held on Mt. Popa in 9th month which thus came to be called Nat-taw month.

Mt Popa and Nats

In fact, the real dwellers of Nat spirits on the Mt Popa were Byatta and Mei Wunna.

Byatta was an equestrian of the Bagan Kingdom and he was sent out to Mt Popa to gather information and bring royal flowers. He met with Mei Wunna, a local beautiful girl, and they fell in love.

Two sons Shwe Hpyin Gyi and Shwe Hpyin Nge were born to them.

Byatta became a Nat spirit at Popa after he was executed by King Anawrahta. Two sons Shwe Hpyingyi and Shwe Hpyin Nge were also executed and became Nat spirits. Their mother Mei Wunna died of broken heart and became a Nat namely Popa Mei Daw or Popa Mother.

In month of Nattaw, their festivals are held. Successive Myanmar kings could not and would not stamp out nat spirit worship. They only forbid sacrifice of lives, animals and offering of intoxicants.

In “Loka Byu Ha Kyan” [A Treatise on Court Festivals and Ceremonies] compiled by Minister Thiri Uzana, of Inyone town, Maha Pein-hne festival of Nat-taw is described in full account. The idol of Maha Pein-hne housed in a shrine inside the palace city was put on a specially made coach pulled to their Majesties on the first waxing moon of Nat-taw for royal worship and offerings. On the first waning moon the coach made a round of houses of nobility and aristocracy to receive pujas and offerings. Eight Brahmin Priests on the coach facing eight cardinal points incanted mantras invoking Ganesha god, praying for favour and blessings.

As nat worship or animism predated Buddhism and Myanmar Buddhism tolerates all faiths and beliefs, nat worship stays and coexists with Buddhism till today. Nat shrines in the inner and outer compounds of Shwezigon Pagoda at old Bagana bear strong evidences to the nat worship and nat festivals of the Myanmar people since old days.

More work needed to identify risk from Nigeria strain, says researcher

A researcher who identified a novel coronavirus variant in Nigeria has cautioned against automatic assumptions that it poses similar risks to strains that have emerged elsewhere.

The new strain was uncovered last week by scientists at the African Centre of Excellence for Genomics of Infectious Diseases (ACEGID) in southeastern Nigeria.

ACEGID director Christian Happi said the variant was found in two out of 200 samples of virus collected from patients between

August 3 and October 9.

The two samples were taken from the same state in Nigeria at different times.

They show a variant "different to the one that has been circulating in Nigeria, different from the one in South Africa and different from the one in the UK," he said in an interview with AFP. Britain tightened restrictions after finding a new strain there that it said was more contagious than initial forms of the virus.

South Africa says a new strain detected there could ex-

plain the rapid spread of a second wave that has especially affected younger people.

Happi stressed that scientists were racing to unlock knowledge about the Nigeria strain and urged people not to "extrapolate."

"We have no idea, no evidence to say that this variant is linked to the spike we are seeing in Nigeria or not," said Happi, explaining that samples from the latest cases were being analysed for an answer.

Nigeria has recorded more than 82,000 cases of Covid-19, of

which 1,246 were fatal.

Compared to the country's population of some 200 million people, this number is tiny.

However, the tally of cases has been rising by several hundred a day since the start of December. There has been a major increase in Lagos, Nigeria's economic capital, prompting the authorities there to reinstate a curfew and gatherings of more than 50 people.

But the number of deaths in Nigeria has not experienced a proportionate surge.

Virus mutation

Happi, a Cameroon-raised, Harvard-trained professor of molecular biology, works in a state-of-the-art lab in Ede, southeastern Nigeria.

It is one of only 12 in Africa designed to sequence viral genetic code and track mutations – tell-tale changes that can be used to build a family tree of the microbe.

From this, the scientists at Ede believe the variant evolved "within Nigeria, I don't think it was imported from anywhere,"

said Happi.

"When changes occur, what matters most, what we're focusing on, is the spike protein," he said, referring to the prong-like protein by which coronavirus latches onto a cell and infects it.

Happi said there was a "tendency to extrapolate" after a discovery of this kind.

But he cautioned strongly against automatically assuming that what happened in one population setting would also happen elsewhere.

SOURCE: AFP

President's Office continues announcement of illegal drug arrests, seizures action on tip-offs

THE Office of the President issued Press Release 45/2020 yesterday, publicly announcing the Ministry of Home Affairs' arrests and seizures in the fight against illicit drug trafficking up till 26 December.

The ministry made the arrests, acting on information, sent to the Drug Activity Special Complaint Department of the Office of the President as of 26 December. The full text of the press release will be reported in the 30 December issue of *The Global New Light of Myanmar*.—GNLM

73rd Independence Day Anniversary (2021)

National Objectives

1. All Union nationals to protect and strive with “collective strength” for Non-disintegration of the Union, Non-disintegration of National Unity, and Perpetuation of National Sovereignty.
2. All citizens to be able to enjoy on the same level - social equality, economic equality, political equality, equality as citizens, equal opportunity, and equality before the law.
3. To strive towards the amendment of the Constitution for the emergence of a genuine Democratic Federal Union.
4. To build a modern developed Democratic Federal Union by nurturing Union spirit for the perpetuation of the Union.
5. The government, together with the people to confront with collective strength the challenges faced by the entire people with increased momentum for all-round development of the country.



Myanmar Daily Weather Report (Issued at 7:00 pm Monday 28th December, 2020)

BAY INFERENCE: Weather is generally fair over the North Bay and a few cloud to partly cloudy over the Andaman Sea and elsewhere over the Bay of Bengal.

FORECAST VALID UNTIL AFTERNOON OF THE 29th December, 2020: Light rain are likely to be isolated in Taninthayi Region. Degree of certainty is (60%). Weather will be partly cloudy in Kachin, Kayin, Mon States and generally fair in the remaining Regions and States.

STATE OF THE SEA: Seas will be moderate in Myanmar waters. Wave height will be about (4-6) feet off and along Myanmar Coasts.

OUTLOOK FOR SUBSEQUENT: Generally fair in the whole country.

FORECAST FOR NAY PYI TAW AND NEIGHBOURING AREA FOR 29th December, 2020: Fair weather.

FORECAST FOR YANGON AND NEIGHBOURING AREA FOR 29th December, 2020: Generally fair weather.

FORECAST FOR MANDALAY AND NEIGHBOURING AREA FOR 29th December, 2020: Fair weather.

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FINANCE

China orders Ant Group to return to online payment roots

CHINESE fintech giant Ant Group has been ordered by regulators to drastically change its business model and return to its roots as a payment services provider, as the state squeeze continues on the once unbridled empire of tech tycoon Jack Ma.

China's central bank summoned Ant executives over the weekend and demanded the company "strictly rectify" its lending, insurance and wealth management services, according to a statement released on Sunday.

The edict comes just weeks after Ant Group's record-breaking IPO was halted at the last minute by Beijing, which has been ruthless in its takedown of a company once vaunted as the poster child for Chinese technology.

Last Thursday regulators also launched an anti-monopoly investigation into Alibaba -- of which Ant Group is a subsidiary -- sending the share price of the e-commerce giant tumbling and intensifying the troubles of its billionaire founder Ma.

Alibaba's dropped nearly



This photo taken on October 13, 2020 shows the Ant Group headquarters in Hangzhou, in China's eastern Zhejiang province. PHOTO: AFP

nine percent in Monday trading in Hong Kong, as investors grow increasingly nervous over a company in the teeth of Beijing's regulators.

Ant Group made its name via its main product Alipay, the online payments platform and

super-app that is now deeply embedded in China's economy.

But the company also expanded into offering loans, credit, investments and insurance to hundreds of millions of consumers and small businesses, spurring fear and jealousy in a wider

banking system geared more for supporting state policy and large corporations.

Xinhua news agency reported Ant Group is now "strictly prohibited from unfair competition" and is urged to redress its "illegal" financial activities.

The online payment titan's problems include alleged flaws in corporate governance, poor legal awareness and a lack of regulatory compliance, while it stands accused of "leveraging market dominance to exclude competitors".

Its reach into the daily spend of Chinese has also caused anxiety over the potential for personal debt to turn sour and poison the wider economy.

As global demand for the dual Hong Kong-Shanghai listing pushed the IPO toward record valuations -- potentially handing Ma and Ant Group even more funding, legitimacy and clout -- Chinese regulators acted.

The outspoken and charismatic Ma -- a former teacher -- had previously lashed out at China's outdated financial system, calling state-owned banks "pawn shops" in an October speech that led to him being summoned for regulatory talks shortly before Ant's IPO was suspended.

He has edged away from the limelight since the IPO collapsed.

SOURCE: AFP

ESPIONAGE

Russia expels Bulgarian diplomat in tit-for-tat response

RUSSIA on Monday said that it had expelled a Bulgarian diplomat in a tit-for-tat response after the EU and NATO member state declared a Russian military attaché persona non-grata earlier this month.

The foreign ministry said in response to the "unjustified" removal of its diplomat from Bulgaria, it had declared the assistant to Bulgaria's military attaché "persona non-grata", giving him 72 hours to leave Russia. Bulgaria earlier this month expelled the Russian

military attaché after prosecutors opened a probe against him for spying on US troops based in the country.

It was the sixth case of a Russian diplomat or embassy official being expelled by what was once one of Moscow's most staunch allies over spying allegations since October 2019.

Moscow in October declared two Bulgarian diplomats persona non-grata after Sofia expelled two Russians on accusations of spying for the military.

SOURCE: AFP

RELIGION LAW

Thousands protest effort to rewrite Montenegro church law

SEVERAL thousand people protested in Montenegro's capital Monday against the new government's efforts to change a controversial religion law that has stoked tensions over the country's complex relationship with Serbia.

Chanting "This is not Serbia", the crowd defied pandemic-related bans on gatherings to rally outside parliament after the new pro-Serb government proposed edits to legislation that has divided the public for the past year.

Passed in late 2019, the law laid out a process that could see

hundreds of monasteries run by the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) turned into Montenegrin state property.

But the new government, which is pro-Serb and closely aligned with the Church, is now proposing rewrites to ensure the properties stay in the hands of the SPC, which is based in Belgrade.

The protesters accused the government, which took power earlier this month, of trying to "erase the Montenegrin state and national identity".

While Montenegro declared independence from Serbia 14

years ago, their histories and cultures are deeply intertwined.

Around a third of the population of 620,000 identify as Serb while the SPC is still the main religious institution in the country.

Montenegro's President Milo Djukanovic, whose party passed the original law, has been eager to curb the SPC's clout in Montenegro and build up an independent Orthodox church.

But in August elections his Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) lost -- for the first time in three decades -- to an opposition bloc led by SPC allies.

SOURCE: AFP

DIPLOMACY

Moroccan team in Israel to set up liaison office: source

MOROCCAN officials are in Israel laying the groundwork for the opening of a liaison office in the Jewish state, a source familiar with the topic told AFP on Monday.

The Moroccan "technical" team landed on Sunday, days after the North African kingdom

and Israel signed a US-sponsored normalization agreement in Rabat, the source said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The team was expected to remain in the country for a few days and would be followed at a later date by a larger delegation, the source added, without provid-

ing further details. Morocco is the third Arab nation this year to normalize ties with the Jewish state under US-brokered deals, while Sudan has pledged to follow suit.

Four bilateral deals were signed Tuesday between Israel and Morocco, centring on direct air links, water management,

connecting financial systems and a visa waiver arrangement for diplomats. The countries are also due to reopen diplomatic offices.

On Friday, the office of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he had invited Morocco's King Mohammed VI for a visit during a phone call.

Morocco closed its liaison office in Tel Aviv in 2000, at the start of the second Palestinian intifada, or uprising. The kingdom has North Africa's largest Jewish community of about 3,000 people, and Israel is home to 700,000 Jews of Moroccan origin.

SOURCE: AFP

HOSPITALS

44% of advanced treatment hospitals face difficulty due to virus

FORTY-FOUR per cent of responding hospitals that offer advanced medical procedures in Japan have faced difficulty providing necessary treatment to patients amid a nationwide surge in novel coronavirus cases, a Kyodo News survey showed Monday.

The survey found some advanced treatment hospitals for patients with conditions such as cancer that are difficult to treat at ordinary hospitals have postponed surgeries for non-COVID-19 patients or limited accepting emergency patients. The findings in the survey conducted in early December highlight the degree of strain on the medical system at a time when Japan has seen a resurgence in coronavirus cases since November. The daily infections reached a record 3,881 on Saturday, with Tokyo, the hardest-hit area among 47 prefectures, logging the highest number of 949 infections.

More than 224,000 virus cases have been reported in the country, with over 3,300 deaths.

Among the responses, Hokkaido University Hospital said when it sent its nurses to care for coronavirus patients, it had to have other departments scale down their services. University of Yamanashi Hospital said it has postponed scheduled surgeries.

SOURCE: KYODO NEWS

ITALY

Joy, hope as staff at Italy's Covid epicentre gets first jabs

LESS than a year ago, doctors in northern Italy were so overwhelmed with Covid-19 patients that they were carrying out triage in hastily erected tents.

The hospital at Cremona was at the heart of the unfolding tragedy.

On Sunday, its nurses carried out the first vaccinations against the disease that has claimed some 72,000 lives in Italy, nearly 25,000 of them in the northern Lombardy region.

The arrival of the vaccine has sent hopes soaring in Cremona among healthcare workers at the frontline of the tragedy back in late February.

"Today is a big moment when you think back to all that we have been through... especially during the first wave of the pandemic," said Isabella Palazzini, a nurse who was among the first to get the jab on Sunday.

"They were very difficult times, both for the patients and for us, the care givers," said Palazzini, three of whose colleagues died of Covid.

Fifty of Italy's first lot of 9,750 doses arrived in Cremona, an hour's drive from Milan, aboard an ambulance escorted by two police vehicles.

The delivery of the precious cargo took place with great fanfare, with the mask-wearing mayor and local administration chief in attendance.

The uniformed police and hospital workers broke out in spontaneous applause.

'Moment of great happiness'

Armed police then accompanied the vaccines packed in a



Silvio Angelo Garattini (L), Italian scientist and pharmacologist, president and founder of the "Mario Negri" Institute for Pharmacological Research, and other patients receive an injection of their first dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech Covid-19 vaccine at Niguarda Hospital in Milan, Italy, on 27 December 2020. PHOTO: AFP

grey container similar to a picnic cooler and loaded it onto a trolley to be transferred into waiting refrigerators where they will be kept under lock and key.

"It is a moment of great happiness," said Monia Betti, head of the hospital's pneumology department.

"It is the hope of a change that has finally materialized after 10 months in which we have assisted very seriously-ill patients."

Before the pandemic, Cremona was best known as the home of the Stradivarius violin.

The town of some 70,000 residents boasts 160 luthiers, who already faced foreign competition before the pandemic struck, devastating the economy and bringing cultural life to a standstill.

The outbreak started on February 21 in northern Italy, when

it became the new epicentre of the pandemic after China where it originated.

By February 22, Italy counted 79 deaths from 2,500 cases. Within a month, Lombardy alone had recorded more than 2,500 deaths.

The arrival of the vaccines comes after Italy, fearing a third wave, reimposed restrictions just before Christmas to avoid an explosion of cases after the holidays.

The country now hopes to launch a mass vaccination programme in early January with 470,000 injections scheduled each week.

In the meantime, Angelo Pan, head of the infectious diseases department at Cremona, stressed the importance of Italians remaining vigilant.

"It will take time before the percentage of the population vaccinated has reached a level that seriously limits the spread of the virus," he said.

"This is not the end of the story, but we are on the right track."

The government estimates that this proportion should be between 75 and 80 per cent, while fewer than 60 per cent of Italians say they intend to have the jab.

Enrico Sorti, head of Cremona's intensive care unit, did not hesitate and was one of the very first to receive the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine.

Nothing, he said, supports "the thesis that the path taken to arrive at the vaccine was less effective, less efficient and less prudent".

SOURCE: AFP

TOURISM

Sri Lanka welcomes first tourists despite new coronavirus strain



In this photograph taken on 20 November 2019, tourists take pictures of a herd of elephants from the Pinnawala Elephant Orphanage walking near a river in Pinnawala about 90 kms from the capital city Colombo. PHOTO: AFP

SRI Lanka welcomed its first foreign tourists in nine months Monday even as a new deadlier strain of the coronavirus gripped the island.

A charter flight carrying 185 passengers from Ukraine landed at a little-used airport south of the capital, which has been stricken by a surge in Covid-19 cases and deaths.

In less than three months, the official number of coronavirus fatalities has risen from 13 to 191, while the number of infections has gone from 3,300 to more than 41,000.

Still, authorities hope the

Ukrainian arrivals will be the first of thousands of foreigners to visit -- easing pressure on the tourism-reliant economy that was shut down in March.

The visitors, who had to produce coronavirus-free certificates before departure, were tested again on arrival at Rajapaksa International airport.

They will be confined to their hotels for the duration of their holiday.

"This is a pilot project to test our systems," government spokesman Ramesh Pathirana said, adding that there would be a review after one month.

Sri Lanka's international borders remain closed, with the exception of repatriation flights and charters approved by local health authorities.

But Sri Lanka is also scheduled to host a two-Test cricket tour by England next month.

The moves come despite authorities announcing a deadlier coronavirus strain.

Minister for COVID Disease Control, Sudharshini Fernando, said the strain was more infectious than one which spread in Sri Lanka between January and October.

SOURCE: AFP

UPDATE

Coronavirus: Latest global developments



Police officers stand on duty at beneath a sign reading "Testing to Commence", at the entrance to the Port of Dover in Kent, south east England, on December 23, 2020, where COVID-19 testing is set to begin on drivers who have been queueing to leave the UK. **PHOTO: AFP**

HERE are the latest developments in the coronavirus crisis:

First vaccinations in the EU
Most EU countries launch

their vaccination campaigns in a bid to defeat Covid-19, as the growing spread of a new coronavirus variant intensifies fears the pandemic could wreak further

devastation.

Three EU countries – Germany, Hungary and Slovakia – already started vaccinating a day earlier.

AstraZeneca Covid vaccine has 'winning formula'

The Covid-19 vaccine developed by the British drugs group AstraZeneca and the University of Oxford has achieved a "winning formula" for efficacy, the company's chief executive says.

Pascal Soriot says in an interview with Britain's Sunday Times he believes trials will show his firm has achieved a vaccine efficacy equal to Pfizer-BioNTech at 95 per cent and Moderna at 94.5 per cent.

The vaccine, which is currently being evaluated by Britain's independent medicines regulator, also provides 100 per cent protection against severe Covid illness requiring hospitalization.

Israel enters third nationwide lockdown

Israel begins its third coronavirus lockdown, as Prime Min-

ister Benjamin Netanyahu voices optimism that a "world record" vaccination drive will restore a degree of normality within weeks.

The lockdown, which begins at 5:00 pm (1500 GMT), forces most people to stay within 1,000 metres (yards) of their home.

There are a range of exceptions, including grocery shopping, seeking medical care, attending legal proceedings or exercising.

Gibraltar imposes curfew

Faced with a new surge in infections, Gibraltar, a British enclave in the far south of Spain, announces new restrictions, including the closure of non-essential businesses and a curfew between 10 pm and 6 am.

France doesn't rule out third lockdown

French health minister Olivier Veran warns that a third nationwide lockdown cannot be ruled out if the situation deteriorates again.

The country's health authorities are worried that there might be a third wave after the year-end

festivities.

80 million infections worldwide

The novel coronavirus has killed at least 1,758,026 people since the outbreak emerged in China last December, according to a tally from official sources compiled by AFP.

At least 80,264,840 cases of coronavirus have been registered. Of these, at least 50,548,400 are now considered recovered.

The United States is the worst-affected country with 331,916 deaths from 18,985,938 cases.

After the US, the hardest-hit countries are Brazil with 190,795 deaths from 7,465,806 cases, India with 147,622 deaths from 10,187,850 cases and Mexico with 122,026 deaths from 1,377,217 cases. The country with the highest number of deaths compared to its population is Belgium with 165 fatalities per 100,000 inhabitants, followed by Slovenia with 122, Bosnia-Herzegovina with 120 and Italy with 118.

SOURCE: AFP

PANDEMIC LAW

Sweden proposes pandemic law for broader shutdown powers

SWEDEN'S government on Monday presented a temporary pandemic law giving it new powers to curb the spread of Covid-19, which it said it hoped to have in place by January.

The government, which has controversially relied on mostly non-coercive measures during the pandemic, said the new law would enable it to close down businesses, shopping malls or public transport.

It would also be able to impose limits on the number of people allowed in specific public places, rather than general restrictions on public gatherings.

"Those who violate restrictions that limit access to public places can be sentenced to a monetary fine," Health Minister Lena Hallengren told a press conference.

SOURCE: AFP

VACCINE CAMPAIGN

Vaccine campaign grows alongside fears Covid spreading faster

BELGIUM on Monday joined a growing list of countries to launch Covid-19 vaccination campaigns, while a new coronavirus variant believed to be more infectious spread further and other nations ramped up restrictions.

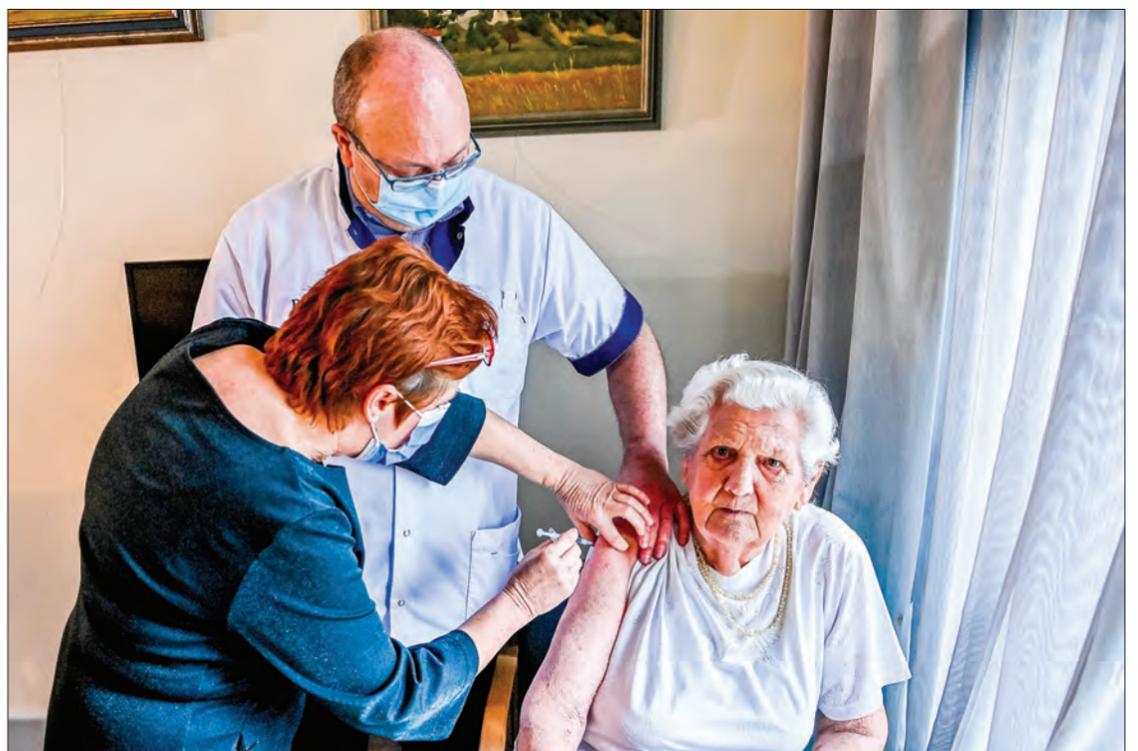
Israel, where Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has boasted of a "world record" vaccination drive that inoculated 380,000 of its 8.7 million people by Monday, began issuing shots to soldiers at 17 centres nationwide.

While the IDF is "one of the first militaries in the world to launch a vaccination campaign for its soldiers," it will be "months" before all are protected, doctor Yael Arbel of the army medical corps said.

The Middle Eastern country began its third coronavirus lockdown on Sunday, while Poland on Monday entered three weeks of new restrictions.

Just as vaccination drives gather pace, global infections have raced past 80 million with nearly 1.8 million deaths.

Fears have been raised by a new strain of Covid-19 first detected in Britain and believed by experts to be potentially more transmissible.



Resident Maria receives a Pfizer-BioNTech Covid-19 vaccine, poses with his thumbs up during a vaccination operation at the "Woonzorgcentrum Sint-Pieters" rest home on December 28, 2020 in Puurs, in Belgium's Flemish region, as the country starts its national vaccination campaign to fight against the spread of the novel coronavirus. **PHOTO: AFP**

After it spread to several European countries as well as Japan and Canada, South Korea became the latest nation Monday to detect the virus variant, in three individuals from a London-based family who arrived in the country last week.

Five cases were also identified in Spain's southern Andalusia region.

Itself hard hit by the strain, South Africa became the first African nation to log one million cases, official data showed Sunday.

Authorities there considered reimposing restrictions to battle the second wave of infections, with leaders worldwide facing similar dilemmas over unpopular and economically damaging lockdowns.

SOURCE: AFP

MARKETS

Asian markets mixed as Trump signs Covid relief bill



A pedestrian wearing a face mask walks past an electronic board displaying the closing numbers of Nikkei 225 index in Tokyo on November 9, 2020. PHOTO: AFP

ASIAN markets were mixed Monday as US President Donald Trump signed a massive coronavirus relief bill, with a boost in positive sentiment dampened by concern over a new strain of Covid-19.

Under pressure from all sides, Trump approved the stimulus package worth \$900 billion late Sun-

day in the United States, having delayed doing so for nearly a week.

“An otherwise quiet day in Asia has sparked to life,” Jeffrey Halley, Senior Market Analyst at OANDA, said after the signing.

“The headline should provide a welcome boost to sentiment in Asia, which was likely to waver today as Chinese authori-

ties over the weekend told Ant Financial to go back to its core payments business,” he added.

Before signing the bill, Trump tweeted that he had “good news” to come, sending markets swinging higher even before the measures were approved.

Equities and oil prices have taken a hit recent-

ly as virus cases surged across the planet and a new more transmissible strain was reported in Britain, forcing governments to impose tight restrictions and lockdowns to contain the disease over the festive period.

Tokyo closed 0.7 per cent higher on Monday, with Jakarta, Mumbai and Bangkok also in positive territory.

Shanghai, Seoul and Singapore were flat, while Hong Kong closed down 0.3 per cent and Manila slid 1.1 per cent.

Sydney and Wellington were closed for a holiday.

European stock markets opened firmer. Paris was up 0.7 per cent and Frankfurt rose 1.3 per cent, with dealers citing the Brexit trade deal as a major positive for Europe’s biggest economy and trade powerhouse. London was closed for a holiday.

SOURCE: AFP

BREXIT

EU member states endorse Brexit trade deal

THE 27 EU member states gave the green light on Monday for the post-Brexit trade deal to go into effect on January 1, a spokesman said.

Ambassadors from EU capitals met in Brussels to nod through the accord, using a procedure

which will take effect at 3:00 pm (1400 GMT) on Tuesday.

This will provisionally allow tariff-free trade with Britain to continue after it leaves the EU single market at the New Year.

Sebastian Fischer,

spokesman for the German presidency of the EU, said: “EU Ambassadors have unanimously approved the provisional application of the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement.”

The member states’ adoption of the plan al-

lows it to come into effect in time to head off disruption of cross-Channel trade.

But the deal must still be ratified retrospectively by the European Parliament, probably in late February.

SOURCE: AFP

JAPAN

Tokyo stocks rise in morning as U.S. stimulus lifts sentiment

TOKYO stocks edged up Monday morning as investor sentiment improved after U.S. President Donald Trump signed an economic stimulus package to address fallout from the coronavirus pandemic.

The 225-issue Nikkei Stock Average rose 114.42 points, or 0.43 per cent, from Friday to 26,771.03. The broader Topix index of all First Section issues on the Tokyo Stock Exchange was up 6.59 points, or 0.37 per cent, at 1,785.00.

Gainers were led by pulp and paper, electric

and gas, and land transportation issues.

The U.S. dollar stayed in the mid-103 yen zone, helped by easing concerns that Washington may be forced to delay implementing stimulus measures.

At noon, it fetched 103.58-59 yen, compared with 103.40-65 yen in Tokyo at 5 pm Friday. Financial markets in New York and London were closed Friday for the Christmas holiday. The euro was quoted at \$1.2209-2210 and 126.44-49 yen against \$1.2185-2200 and 126.21-25 yen in Tokyo

late Friday afternoon.

Shares were higher from the opening after Trump tweeted late Sunday “good news” on the COVID-19 relief bill.

Trump signed the stimulus package along with an annual government funding bill into law, averting a government shutdown before a Monday night deadline.

“News about the progress in U.S. stimulus bolstered the market, but investors didn’t take it as a cue to buy further amid the worsening coronavi-

rus infection situation,” said Kazuo Kamitani, a strategist in the Investment Content Department of Nomura Securities Co. A potentially more transmissible coronavirus variant, first detected in Britain, has been confirmed in many other countries including Japan, which on Monday suspended new entries into the country by nonresident foreign nationals arriving from most of the world through the end of January.

SOURCE: KYODO

TRADE

Viet Nam posts highest trade surplus in 5 years

VIETNAM recorded export turnovers of approximately 281.5 billion U.S. dollars in 2020, up 6.5 per cent year-on-year, and import turnovers of over 262.4 billion U.S. dollars, up 3.6 per cent, with a trade surplus of 19.1 billion U.S. dollars, the highest in the past five years, the General Statistics Office said on Monday.

Specifically, Vietnam gained nearly 50.9 billion U.S. dollars from exporting phones and components, down 1 per cent; roughly 44.7 billion U.S. dollars from electronic goods, computers and components, up 24.4 per cent; around 29.5 billion U.S. dollars from garments and textiles, down 10.2 per cent; and nearly 16.6 billion U.S. dollars from footwear, down 9.6 per cent.

The United States remained Vietnam’s biggest

importer with turnovers of 76.4 billion U.S. dollars, tailed by China with 48.5 billion U.S. dollars and the European Union with 34.8 billion U.S. dollars, said the office. In the same period, Vietnam spent nearly 64 billion U.S. dollars importing electronic goods, computers and components, up 24.6 per cent; roughly 37.4 billion U.S. dollars on machines, equipment and spare parts, up 1.7 per cent, and 16.6 billion U.S. dollars on phones and components, up 13.3 per cent.

Meanwhile, China was Vietnam’s largest exporter with turnovers of 83.9 billion U.S. dollars, followed by South Korea with 46.3 billion U.S. dollars and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) with 30 billion U.S. dollars, according to the office.

SOURCE: XINHUA

CLAIMS DAY NOTICE

M.V OCEAN PROBE VOY. NO. (056N/S)

Consignees of cargo carried on **M.V OCEAN PROBE VOY. NO. (056N/S)** are hereby notified that the vessel will be arriving on **29-12-2020** and cargo will be discharged into the premises of **TMIT/MIP** where it will lie at the consignee’s risk and expenses and subject to the byelaws and conditions of the Port of Yangon.

Damaged cargo will be surveyed daily from 8 am to 11:20 am and 12 noon to 4 pm to Claim’s Day now declared as the third day after final discharge of cargo from the Vessel.

No claims against this vessel will be admitted after the Claims Day.

Phone No: **2301185**

Shipping Agency Department
Myanma Port Authority

Agent For:

M/S CONTINENTAL SHIPPING LINE PTE LTD

CLAIMS DAY NOTICE

M.V DAI DUONG SEA

Consignees of cargo carried on **M.V DAI DUONG SEA VOY. NO. (-)** are hereby notified that the vessel will be arriving on **28-12-2020** and cargo will be discharged into the premises of **IBTT** where it will lie at the consignee’s risk and expenses and subject to the byelaws and conditions of the Port of Yangon.

Damaged cargo will be surveyed daily from 8 am to 11:20 am and 12 noon to 4 pm to Claim’s Day now declared as the third day after final discharge of cargo from the Vessel.

No claims against this vessel will be admitted after the Claims Day.

Phone No: **2301191/2301178**

Shipping Agency Department
Myanma Port Authority

Agent For:

M/S WILHELMSSEN SHIP SERVICE(S) PTE LTD

ACCIDENT

17 fishermen
feared dead
after boat
sinks in
Arctic Russia

SEVENTEEN fishermen were missing and feared dead on Monday after a Russian boat capsized during a storm and sank in the freezing waters of the Barents Sea.

Officials said that two people had been rescued during a search-and-rescue operation, but that bad weather conditions had complicated efforts to find survivors.

The privately-owned boat, called Onega, sank near the Novaya Zemlya archipelago in the Barents Sea, with authorities becoming aware of the accident at 7.30 am (0430 GMT), officials said.

"As a result of the accident, 19 people ended up in the water," said the Investigative Committee, which probes serious crimes, adding two people were rescued.

SOURCE: AFP

HEALTH

South Africa logs million virus cases as pandemic surges worldwide

SOUTH Africa logged its millionth case of Covid-19 and South Korea on Monday became the latest country to detect the new coronavirus variant, as the pandemic showed no signs of letting up.

Global infections have raced past 80 million with nearly 1.8 million deaths, even as vaccination drives gather pace in North America and Europe, with a top US expert warning that the pandemic might get even worse in the coming weeks.

The explosion of cases worldwide in recent weeks has prompted the return of many unpopular restrictions, including some lockdowns, and concerns have grown after the detection of a new virus variant experts believe could be more transmissible.

South Africa became the first African nation to log one million cases, official data showed Sunday, as authorities considered reimposing restrictions to battle a second wave of infections driven by the new variant.

South Korea became the latest nation Monday to detect the variant, in three individuals



About 300 children gather at Coronationville Secondary School as they wait for a food and goods distribution ahead of Christmas, lead by the grassroots charity Hunger Has No Religion, in Coronationville, Johannesburg, on 23 December 2020. PHOTO: AFP

of a London-based family who arrived in the country last week.

The new variant was first detected in Britain, and made its way to a number of other nations including Japan and Canada, prompting dozens of governments -- including Euro-

pean nations -- to impose travel restrictions on the UK.

Most European countries began their vaccination campaigns over the weekend, boosting hopes of an end to the pandemic, especially in some of the hardest-hit parts of the

continent.

"Today is a big moment when you think back to all that we have been through... especially during the first wave of the pandemic," said Isabella Palazzini, an Italian nurse in Cremona.

SOURCE: AFP

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Saudi activist Loujain al-Hathloul
jailed for 5 years, 8 months

A Saudi court on Monday sentenced prominent activist Loujain al-Hathloul to five years and eight months in prison for terrorism-related crimes, according to local media allowed to attend her trial.

The women's rights activist was convicted of "various activities prohibited by the anti-terrorism law", the pro-government online outlet Sabq and other media cited the court as saying.

They added that the court suspended two years and 10 months of the sentence "if she does not commit any crime" within the next three years.

The reports did not explain whether the sentence included time served or say when she may be released from custody. A motion to appeal can be filed within 30 days.

Hathloul, 31, was arrested in May 2018 with about a dozen other women activists just weeks before the historic lifting



(FILES) In this file handout released on the Facebook page of Saudi activist Loujain al-Hathloul on August 6, 2019 shows her posing for the camera.

PHOTO: AFP

of a decades-long ban on female drivers, a reform they had long campaigned for.

After being tried in Riyadh's criminal court, her trial was transferred last month to the Specialized Criminal Court

(SCC), or the anti-terrorism court, which campaigners say is notorious for issuing long jail terms and is used to silence critical voices under the cover of fighting terrorism.

Earlier this month, Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan told AFP that Hathloul was accused of contacting "unfriendly" states and providing classified information, but her family said no evidence to support the allegations had been put forward.

While some detained women activists have been provisionally released, Hathloul and others remain imprisoned on what rights groups describe as opaque charges.

The pro-government Saudi media has branded them as "traitors" and Hathloul's family alleges she experienced sexual harassment and torture in detention. Saudi authorities deny the charges.

SOURCE: AFP

EU

Small delay in Pfizer
vaccine deliveries to 8
EU nations: Spain

PFIZER has postponed the delivery of new batches of its coronavirus vaccine to eight European nations including Spain, the Spanish health ministry said Monday, a day after the EU began its immunization campaign.

The Spanish branch of Pfizer informed Madrid on Sunday night of the delay in shipments to the eight nations due to a "problem in the loading and shipment process" at its plant in Belgium, the health ministry said in a statement.

It did not specify which European nations aside from Spain were affected, but said Spain's next delivery would be on Tuesday, a day later than expected. "Due to a minor logistical issue, we have rescheduled a limited number of our deliveries," Andrew Widge, Pfizer's director for media relations said.

"The logistical matter has been resolved and those deliveries are now being dispatched. There are no manufacturing issues to report."

Asked about the delay during an interview with radio station Cadena Ser, Spain's Health Minister Salvador Illa said it was due to a problem "linked to the control of the temperature" of the shipments which was "apparently fixed".

The vaccine must be stored at ultra-low temperatures of about minus 70 degrees Celsius (-112 Fahrenheit) before being shipped to distribution centres in specially designed cool boxes filled with dry ice.

Once out of ultra-low temperature storage, the vaccine must be kept at two Celsius to eight Celsius to remain effective for up to five days.

SOURCE: AFP

RIGHTS

Chinese citizen journalist jailed for Wuhan virus reporting



This screengrab taken on 28 December 2020 from an undated video showing former Chinese lawyer and citizen journalist Zhang Zhan as she broadcasts via YouTube, at an unconfirmed location in China.

PHOTO: AFP

A Chinese citizen journalist was jailed for four years Monday for her reporting from Wuhan as the Covid-19 outbreak unfurled, her lawyer said, almost a year after details of an “unknown viral pneumonia” surfaced in the central China city.

Zhang Zhan, a former lawyer, was sentenced at a brief hearing in a Shanghai court for allegedly “picking quarrels and provoking trouble” during her reporting in the chaotic initial

stages of the outbreak.

Her live reports and essays were shared on social media platforms in February, grabbing the attention of authorities, who have punished eight virus whistleblowers so far as they defang criticism of the government’s response to the outbreak.

Beijing has congratulated itself for “extraordinary” success in controlling the virus inside its borders, with an economy on the rebound while much of the rest of

the world stutters through painful lockdowns and surging caseloads a year on from the start of the pandemic in Wuhan.

Controlling the information flow during an unprecedented global health crisis has been pivotal in allowing China’s communist authorities to reframe the narrative in their favour, with President Xi Jinping being garlanded for his leadership by the country’s ruling party.

But that has come at a serious cost to anyone who has picked holes in the official storyline.

The court said Zhang Zhan had spread “false remarks” online, according to one of her lawyers Zhang Keke, but the prosecution did not fully divulge its evidence in court.

“We had no way of understanding what exactly Zhang Zhan was accused of doing,” he added, describing it as “a speedy, rushed hearing”.

In return the defendant “didn’t respond [to questions]... She refused to answer when the judge asked her to confirm her identity”.

The defendant’s mother sobbed loudly as the verdict was read out, Ren Quanniu, another member of Zhang’s defence team, told reporters who were barred from entering the court.

Concerns are mounting over the health of 37-year-old Zhang, who began a hunger strike in June and has been force-fed via a nasal tube.

Her legal team said her health was in decline and she suffered from headaches, dizziness and stomach pain, and that she had appeared in court in a wheelchair.

“She said when I visited her (last week): ‘If they give me a heavy sentence then I will refuse food until the very end.’... She thinks she will die in prison,” Ren said before the trial.

“It’s an extreme method of protesting against this society and this environment.”

China’s communist authorities have a history of putting dissidents on trial in opaque courts between Christmas and New Year in an effort to minimise Western scrutiny.

SOURCE: AFP

NEWS IN BRIEF

UNREST

Indian army officer accused of planting weapons on Kashmir civilians

INDIAN police on Sunday accused an army officer and two associates of planting weapons on the bodies of three labourers killed in Kashmir to make it look as though they were militants in a staged gun battle.

Their July deaths sparked a furore in the Indian administered side of the Himalayan region that is also claimed by Pakistan.—SOURCE: AFP

TRANSPORT

Japan halts new entries from around world over new virus variant

JAPAN suspended Monday new entries into the country by nonresident foreign nationals arriving from most of the world through the end of January as it seeks to prevent the spread of the new, potentially more transmissible coronavirus variant.

The government will also require Japanese citizens and foreign residents coming from regions where the new variant has been detected to submit negative virus test results from within 72 hours of departure and undergo tests upon arrival from Wednesday through the end of January.

SOURCE: KYODO NEWS

VACCINE

Security team for Philippines’ Duterte gets unauthorized Covid-19 vaccine

MEMBERS of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte’s security team have received a Chinese-made coronavirus vaccine, officials said Monday -- the first people in the country to be officially immunized despite no regulatory approval.

The Philippines is in talks with several pharmaceutical firms, including Britain’s AstraZeneca, US company Pfizer and China’s Sinopharm, to secure 60 million doses for a vaccination drive starting as early as the second quarter of 2021.

SOURCE: AFP

EPIDEMIC

South Korea detects first coronavirus variant cases

Three cases of a particularly infectious coronavirus variant that recently emerged in Britain have been confirmed in South Korea, health authorities said Monday.

The three individuals are members of a London-based family who arrived in the country on December 22, according to the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency.

They have been placed in isolation since testing positive for Covid-19 on arrival, the KDCA statement said.

The new strain of the virus emerged earlier this month in Britain and has already reached several European countries, as well as Canada, Jordan and Japan.

Last week London said another new variant of the virus was found in the country in cases linked to South Africa, which is the first African nation to record one million coronavirus cases.

The new strain, which experts fear is more contagious, prompted more than 50 countries to impose travel restrictions on Britain.

South Korea was among



A medical staff member wearing protective gear takes a swab from a visitor to test for the Covid-19 coronavirus at a temporary testing station outside the City Hall in Seoul on 28 December 2020. PHOTO: AFP

them and has barred flights from Britain until January 7. In addition, the country will make it mandatory for passengers travelling from Britain or South Africa to submit negative Covid-19 test results before departure, KDCA chief Jung Eun-kyeong said.

Authorities are also looking into the case of an elderly South Korean man who tested positive for Covid-19 after his body was returned from Britain earlier this month.

The announcement came as a third wave of the virus grips the country, with a resurgence cen-

tred on the greater Seoul area seeing daily cases climb to over 1,000 several times this month despite stricter distancing measures. South Korea reported 808 new cases Monday, raising its national total to 57,680 with 819 deaths.

SOURCE: AFP

Velizar Popov to coach Myanmar U-23 team in Viet Nam SEA Games



Head coach Velizar Popov. PHOTO: VELIZAR POPOV FACEBOOK PAGE

HEAD coach Velizar Popov will handle the U-23 men's Myanmar national football squad in the upcoming 2021 South East Asian (SEA) Games in Viet Nam as Myanmar Football Federation has recently extended his contract, according to the football authorities.

"Delighted to have been offered and can confirm that I agreed to accept the proposal of the Myanmar Football Federation (MFF) to extend my contract for another year until the end of 2021", said head coach Popov.

"We have already improved many things in technical, tactical, physical, and mental aspects during 2019, both collectively as a team and individually as the development of each player; in

2020 the pandemic has made it difficult and we couldn't progress the way we wanted, but we're excited about the future in 2021 and where we want to reach next year is a faraway, distant place right now, so we'll keep trying and moving forward in order to improve more and to achieve something bigger.

Thanks to the Myanmar Football Federation (MFF) and Myanmar National League (MNL) Clubs, we will restart our preparation for all important tournaments in 2021 as SEA Games, AFC Qualifiers, and AFF Championship with Pre-Season Camp on January 10 until March 14.", the head coach added.

"To those who celebrate, I would like to wish you a Mer-

ry Christmas and Happy New Prosperous Year 2021. Be blessed and big dream", Popov made a special wish to the Myanmar football fans.

Velizar Popov, an experienced head coach and a UEFA Pro license holder, is currently shaping Myanmar U-23 men's national football team to have better movements.

In the AFC Qualifiers, Popov pushed team Myanmar to secure the biggest win ever in the history of the U-23 National Team against Timor Leste by 7-0.

Remarkably, in the men's football competition of the 2019 SEA Games in the Philippines, Popov assisted team Myanmar winning the bronze medal. —Lynn Thit (Tgi) ■

Roger Federer out of Australian Open after knee surgery

MELBOURNE (Australia) — Twenty-time Grand Slam champion Roger Federer will miss the Australian Open for the first time in his career as he continues his recovery from two rounds of knee surgery, organizers said Monday.

The 39-year-old Swiss has been out of action since February but recently resumed training and was on the entry list for year's opening Grand Slam, which will make a delayed start on February 8.

Federer, a huge favourite with the Melbourne crowds, hasn't missed the Australian Open since his debut in 2000, winning the trophy six times.

"In the end Roger ran out of time to get himself ready for the rigours of a Grand Slam and he's very disappointed he won't be coming to Melbourne in 2021," said tournament chief Craig Tiley.

"We wish him all the best as he prepares for his comeback later in the year and look forward to seeing him in Melbourne in 2022."

Federer sat out most of the Covid-disrupted 2020 season after losing to Novak Djokovic in the Melbourne semis in January, his last competitive match.

He underwent keyhole surgery on his right knee in February, before needing a follow-up operation and calling off his season to recover.

The Swiss could only watch as Rafael Nadal matched his all-time men's record of 20 Grand

Slam singles titles with a 13th victory at the French Open.

Federer will now concentrate on getting himself ready for the rest of the 2021 season, which includes the Tokyo Olympics and the chance of his first singles gold medal.

"He has made strong progress in the last couple of months with his knee and his fitness," his agent Tony Godsick said in a statement.

"I will start discussions this coming week for tournaments that begin in late February and then start to build a schedule for the rest of the year," Godsick added.

Murray wildcard

Federer's absence will be felt at the Australian Open, despite

a top-quality field led by world number ones Djokovic and Ashleigh Barty.

US superstar Serena Williams, Federer's contemporary at 39, is also on the entry list as she again attempts to equal Margaret Court's record of 24-time Grand Slam singles titles.

Federer's withdrawal comes as former world number one Andy Murray, a five-time Australian Open finalist, was given a wildcard entry. Tiley welcomed the 33-year-old back to the tournament, two years after his first-round exit prompted fears his career was at an end.

"Seeing him come back, having undergone major surgery and built himself back up to get onto the tour again, will be a highlight," Tiley said.—AFP ■



(FILES) In this file photo taken on 30 January 2020 Switzerland's Roger Federer hits a return against Serbia's Novak Djokovic during their men's singles semi-final match on day eleven of the Australian Open tennis tournament in Melbourne. PHOTO: AFP

Messi says Barca 'my life' but stays tight-lipped on future



Barcelona's Argentine forward Lionel Messi smiles during the Spanish league football match between Real Valladolid FC and FC Barcelona at the Jose Zorrilla stadium in Valladolid on 22 December 2020. PHOTO: AFP

MADRID (Spain) — Lionel Messi remained coy on his future at Barcelona in a long interview broadcast on Sunday in which he called the Catalan giants "my life".

Speaking to Spanish TV channel La Sexta, Messi insisted that he was "excited" to play under coach Ronald Koeman this season despite trying to leave the club where he has played his entire senior career last summer.

He said that at the time he felt like he "needed a change", but his attempted exit was blocked amid a spat with former Barca president Josep Maria Bartomeu. Messi's contract expires at the end of the season and from next month he will be free to negotiate a move away from Catalonia.

"Barca is my life, I'm in love with the club. And the city, my children were born here," Messi said in an interview conducted earlier this month.

"It's true I had a bad time in the summer. It came from everything that happened before the summer, how the season ended, the burofax (how Messi communicated his desire to leave), all of that.

"I carried that into the start of the season a little bit."

Bartomeu stepped down in October and a new Barcelona president will be elected on January 24, after which 33-year-old Messi is expected to begin talks over whether to extend his career-long stay.

"I feel good right now, ready to fight for everything. I feel excited," he said.—AFP ■