Parade of 76th Anniversary Armed Forces Day held; State Administration Council Chairman Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Senior General Maha Thray Sithu Min Aung Hlaing delivers address

To consistently uphold the National Policy: Our Three Main National Causes and foster democracy desired by people not to dissent from its route based on the principles of the Constitution with the entire people.
Five future programmes of State Administration Council

1. The Union Election Commission will be reconstituted to carry out tasks that should be done, including inspection of voting lists in accordance with the law.
2. Effective measures will be taken for the prevention of current infectious COVID-19 with added momentum.
3. Efforts will be made to recover businesses that faced loss caused by COVID-19 in various ways as quickly as possible.
4. Emphasis will be placed on restoring eternal peace in the entire nation in line with agreements from the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) as much as possible.
5. When missions will be accomplished in accord with provisions of the state of emergency, a free and fair multiparty democracy election will be held in accordance with the Constitution (2008), and further tasks will be undertaken to hand over State duty to the winning party meeting the standards of democracy.

Republic of the Union of Myanmar
State Administration Council
Nine Objectives

1. Political affairs
   (a) Building of a Union based on democracy and federalism in practising genuine disciplined multiparty democracy in a full fairness manner
   (b) Emphasizing of restoration of eternal peace for the entire nation in line with the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA)
   (c) Continuous practising of the “principle” of peaceful co-existence among countries by holding up the independent, active and non-aligned foreign policy

2. Economic affairs
   (a) Further development of production based on agriculture and livestock breeding through modern techniques and all-round development of other sectors of the economy as well
   (b) Stability of market economy and inviting international investments to develop the economy of entire ethnic people
   (c) Encouragement of local businesses to create employment opportunities to be able to produce many products of the State

3. Social affairs
   (a) For ensuring of dynamism of Union spirit which is genuine patriotic spirit
   (b) Following customs and traditions of all ethnic nationalities and preservation and safeguarding of cultural heritage and national characters
   (c) Enhancement of health, fitness and education standards of the entire nation

Dinner hosted to mark 76th anniversary of Armed Forces Day

SATC Administration Council Chairman Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and wife Daw Kyu Kyu Hla hosted a dinner to mark the 76th anniversary of Armed Forces Day at Zeyathiri Beikman in Nay Pyi Taw yesterday.

Firstly, SAC Chairman and wife warmly greeted the attendees to the ceremony before the entertainment programmes. Present on the occasion were Russian Deputy Defence Minister Colonel General Alexander Vasilyevich Fomin, SAC Vice-Chair Vice-Senior General Soe Win and wife Daw Than Than Nwe, members of SAC, UEC Chairman, Union Ministers, Union Civil Service Board Chairman, Nay Pyi Taw Council Chairman, CBM Chairman, military personnel from the Office of the Defence Services (Army, Navy, Air), first, second and third-level independence heroes, retired senior military officers (Army, Navy, Air), family members of retired Senior Generals, Union Supreme Court Justices, members of the Constitutional Tribunal and UEC, delegations from the ethnic armed groups signed in Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement, Nay Pyi Taw Council members, winners of Aung San Thuriya and Thura Titles, other relevant officials of militia, Foreign Military Attachés, retired ambassadors, Directors-General, Managing Directors of relevant ministries, members of Myanmar veterans organizations, winners of the competitions marking Armed Forces Day, delegates from the University for Development of National Races and other invited guests.—MNA

18 new cases of COVID-19 reported on 27 March, total figure rises to 142,377

MYANMAR’S COVID-19 positive cases rose to 142,377 after 18 new cases were reported on 27 March 2021 according to the Ministry of Health and Sports. Among these confirmed cases, 3,206 died, 131,788 have been discharged from hospitals.—MNA
Parade of 76th Anniversary Armed Forces Day held;
State Administration Council Chairman Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Senior General Maha Thray Sithu Min Aung Hlaing delivers address

FROM PAGE-1

(Other ranks) company of Office of Commander-in-Chief (Army), Southern Command, Coastal Region Command, Eastern Central Command; Aung San Column led by Column Commander Police Brig-Gen Han Tan comprising the parade companies representing the Guard of Honour, MPF female guard of honour, No. 1 female company, No. 2 female company, No. 1 male company, No. 2 male company, No. 3 male company No. 4 male company of Myanmar Police Force marched to the parade ground together with the military bands in accord with the agenda.

The Parade of 76th Anniversary Armed Forces Day was also attended by delegation led by Deputy Minister of Defence of the Russian Federation Colonel General Alexander Vasilyevich Fomin, Daw Kyu Kyu Hla, wife of the Chairman of the State Administration Council Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services, Daw Than Than Nwe, wife of Vice-Chairman of the Council Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Commander-in-Chief (Army) Vice-Senior General Soe Min Oo, Council members and their wives, the Union chief of justice, the chairman of Constitutional Tribunal, the chairman of Union Election Commission, Union ministers, Union attorney-general, Union Auditor-General, the chairman of Union civil service board, the chairman of Nay Pyi Taw council and the governor of Central Bank of Myanmar and their wives, senior military officers of Office of Commander-in-Chief (Army, Navy and Air) and their wives, Independence Mawgun First, Second and Third Class Award winners, retired senior military officers (Army, Navy and Air), families of retired commanders-in-chief of Defence Services, judges of the Union supreme court, members of Constitution-al Tribunal and UEC members, representatives from the armed ethnic groups who have signed the NCA, members of the Nay Pyi Taw council, families and relatives of Aung San Thuriya title winners, officers and other ranks who were awarded Thura titles and gallantry medals and their families and relatives, members of the People’s Militia (Transform), members of the People’s Militia (original) and Border Guard Central Advisory Group, military attaches and officials from foreign missions, retired ambassadors, directors general and managing directors of respective ministries, retired Tatmadaw who serves as directors general or managing directors of respective ministries, members of Myanmar War Veterans Organization, retired directors general from Myanmar Police Force, Myanmar Fire Brigade and Myanmar Red Cross Society, chairman of political parties, artists who participated in movies honouring the Tatmadaw, writers from Myanmar and their families, priests and nuns, officers (Army, Navy and Air) that promote patriotism on the ground.

During the time, three helicopters, an MI-17 transport helicopter and three K-8 light combat aircraft flew in formation, one Eurocopter helicopter and two light PC-7 surveillance combat aircraft flew in mix formation, five Grob trainer aircraft flew in arrowhead formation, one Beech transport plane and two K-8 light combat aircraft flew in group formation, three JF-17 multipurpose light combat aircraft flew in Vic formation, three A-5 ground-attack aircraft and two F-7 interceptors flew in mixed arrowhead formation leaving yellow, green and red smoke trails representing the State Flag, five Yak-130 light combat aircraft flew in right echelon formation leaving yellow, green and red smoke trails representing the State Flag, five Mig-29 multipurpose combat aircraft flew in arrowhead formation and Fan Break formation in saluting the Senior General. The Senior General cordially greeted the invited guests and left the parade ground, and the ceremony came to an end.

The honourable bronze statues of the founder kings of the First, Second and Third Myanmar Kingdoms, the Armed Forces Day Torch, and the plaque marking the 76th Anniversary Armed Forces Day could be seen with admiration. Moreover, the Burma Independence Army Flag, the Burma Defence Army Flag, the flags of Tatmadaw (Army, Navy and Air), the flags of the directorates of the Office of the Command-er-in-Chief(Army), and the colourful flags bearing the labels of military commands, light infantry divisions and battalions and units were also fluttering on the ground.

Giants posters portraying the activities of Tatmadaw members (Army, Navy and Air) that promote patriotism and nationalistic fervour were erected along Yangoon-Mandalay highway, and Pinaung junction. Posters bearing the mottos of the Tatmadaw in Myanmar and English were erected or hanged along the parade route in honour of the 76th Anniversary Armed Forces Day. 100
Speech Delivered by
Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Senior General Maha Thein Nyunt Sithu
Min Aung Hlaing at the Military Parade in Honour of the
76th Armed Forces Day on 27 March 2021

Comrades,

Today is the parade in honour of the 76th Armed Forces Day of Tatmadaw imbued with the immense prestige fetched in the annals of history remained steadfast in its commitment to protecting the motherland in successive terms, and it is also intended to commemorate the 75th Anniversary (Diamond Jubilee) of Armed Forces Day postponed for COVID-19 pandemic.

First and foremost, I would like to mention that it is a great honour bestowed on Tatmadaw that seeks to uphold the virtuous traditions through the annals till the 75th Anniversary (Diamond Jubilee).

Comrades,

Our country, nestled in a serene shelter with a prosperous identity, is an independent and sovereign State through the annals of history, relinquished independence and sovereignty in 1886 and fell into the suppression of Imperialists for hundred years. Thirty Comrades led by Thakin Aung San and the patriotic leaders composed of multi-national races tried to learn hard the military tactics with the Japanese assistance to establish Tatmadaw for the repulsion to imperialists. With the leading role of Thirty Comrades by Thakin Aung San, Burma Independence Army (BIA) was established in Bangkok, Thailand, on 27 December 1941 and then BIA entwined with patriotic people annihilated the British Imperialists. After the withdrawal of the British, people were brutally tortured, notwithstanding Japan declared nominal independence on 1 August 1943. On 27 March 1945, Tatmadaw in Collaboration with people, launched the triumphal and historical anti-fascist movement. Afterwards, Armed Forces Day was denoted on this date.

Comrades,

Burma Independence Army (BIA) was constituted in sequence as the Burma Defence Army (BDA) in 1942, Burma National Army (BNA) in 1943, Patriotic Burma Force (PBF) in July and Burma Army in September 1945. Tatmadaw was established in hailed from the independence movement since Tatmadaw, together with people, restored independence from the regime of British Imperialist on 4 January 1948.

Comrades,

Since the internal armed conflicts ignited from the spill-over effect of the divide-and-rule policy of Imperialists, ideological differences and ethnic diversity in Post-Independence, Tatmadaw defeated the insurgents with much sacrifice not to relinquish the restored independence. Since the Burma Communist Party (BCP) went underground on 28 March 1948, other armed organizations came into existence. The international community recognized them as multi-coloured insurgents. At that time, General Ne Win, who holds the rank of Chief of Staff of Defence Forces, could restore the Nation’s solidarity and stability by prevailing over the multi-coloured insurgents across the Nation with a handful of Infantry Units and Corps.

The internal armed conflicts did not occur between Tatmadaw and Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) but between government bodies and ethnic groups, and Tatmadaw remained steadfast in its commitment to safeguarding the Nation and its sovereignty.

Comrades,

Tatmadaw has prevailed over the multi-coloured insurgents as well as the intrusion of Kaominthang (White Chinese Army) and Mujahdeens based in Rakhine State during 1960-61.

During 1962-72, Tatmadaw annihilated the insurgents in Bago and Delta Region. Likewise, the movement of BCP settled in the Bago mountain range came to an end in 1975 since Tatmadaw collaborated with people launched major operations by a four-cut strategy.

Comrades,

As the Burma Communist Party launched an attack on Mong Yang with three columns in September 1988 to put the Tatmadaw in a predicament by taking advantage of the 1988 uprising, Tatmadaw engaged in the historical Mong Yang Battle for eight days; consequently, Kokoang seceded from Burma Communist Party after Tatmadaw repelled the anti-communist forces and the BCP Northeast operation area came to an end in the collapse of the Burma Communist Party (Headquarters) due to the seizure of power by UWSA. Tatmadaw also defeated the insurgents who attacked the Methawor area, Karen State in September 1988.

The insurgent outposts stationed along the border of Southeast Command were captured in 1988, and the insurgents encroached upon the Delta region were also annihilated in 1991. The insurgents in the Northeast border, furthermore, initiated the massive attack on Tatmadaw Headquarters and Units in Lawkai in February 2015 to occupy the whole Kokang area and Mankun, 105-mile and Monaw in November 2016. I would like to be aware that Tatmadaw put strenuous effort at risk of their lives, blood and sweat to protect from internal and external destructive elements since the independence movement to date.

Comrades,

At present, the Nation and Tatmadaw had already conferred gallantry titles, medals and certificates to military personnel, members of Myanmar Police Force and People Militia who shouldered the duties at risk of their lives in the interests of Nation and people as in (6) for Aung San Thuriya Title, (50) for Thika Thura Title, (546) for Thura Title, (1,860) for Gallantry Record, (2,018) for Gallantry Medal, (339) for Certificate of Gallantry presented by Field Marshal, and (2,987) for Certificate of Gallantry presented by Command-in-Chief. I would like to convey my great honour to those who gave many sacrifices for the Nation and people though they have not received any gallantry title, medals and certificates, family members of Aung San Thuriya Title winners are requested to have an honour of their company in this ceremony.

Comrades,

In honour of senior comrades, who gave many sacrifices, today military parade portrays the profound demonstration of Burma Independence Army (BIA) Dress, Burma Defence Army (BDA) Dress, Burma National Army (BNA) Dress, Patriotic Burma Force (PBF) Dress and Burma Army Dress which are worn since its inception and the dresses of Tatmadaw (Army, Navy, Air) which are suited in successive terms after the independence.

In honour and rededication of the internal armed conflicts ignited from the spill-over effect of the divide-and-rule policy of Imperialists, ideological differences and ethnic diversity in Post-Independence, Tatmadaw has prevailed and sought the Nation and Tatmadaw in the interests of the Nation and people, blood and sweat to protect the motherland ever since 1948 until today.

While building up the Standard Army, Tatmadaw has designed to broaden the war establishment and integrated weaponry for Army, construct and purchase the naval vessels and gears for the Navy, and seek advantage of modest form in aircraft modernization, production and possession of modern aircraft for Air Force.

Comrades,

The human resources of Tatmadaw make a substantial contribution to the development of the Tatmadaw and Nation-building sectors. In the immense value of HR development for Tatmadaw, there are about 1,200 DSc and PhD holders and 14,000 Master degree holders who are experts in medicine, engineering, technology and fields of specialization, and they prove their mettle in accomplishing the assigned tasks for the Nation and Tatmadaw.

As it is an honour to the 75th March 2020, Tatmadaw conferred honorary awards for gallantry, service, fine arts, literature, business, technology, healthcare and sports. Moreover, Tatmadaw annually trains the athletes who highly represent and stand for the Nation and Tatmadaw. I would like to express my profound gratitude to remarkable military sportsmen in a major role for swimming, football, shooting, boxing and athletics in SEA Games, Asian Games and World Olympic Games.

Comrades,

Tatmadaw also assists in the Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief programme for the Nation and People. Specialists, medical officers and
Speech Delivered by Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Senior General Maha Thray Sithu Min Aung Hlaing at the Military Parade in Honour of the 76th Armed Forces Day on 27 March 2021

Tatmadaw is an institution that has to abide by the promulgated law. It is also needed to abide by the law and be an institution of morale and morality. Therefore, Tatmadaw cooperates with the related departments in the fundamental things; food, clothing and shelter and socio-economic development, including demining in the respective areas for the return of displaced persons stranded on IDP camps.

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Comrades,
Religious Titles Conferring Ceremony for 2021 held in Nay Pyi Taw

A ceremony to confer religious titles was held yesterday afternoon at Sasana Maha Beikman in Uppatasanti Pagoda compound, Nay Pyi Taw.

The ceremony was attended by State Sangha Maha Nayaka Chairman Abhidhaja Maha Rattha Guru Abhidhaja Agga Maha Saddhamma Jotika Bhamo Sayadaw Dr Bhaddanta Kumara Bhivamsa and State Sangha Maha Nayaka Thanlyin Min Kyaung Pahtamayan monastery patron Agga Maha Pandita Agga Maha Jotikadhaja Dr Bhaddanta Candima Bhivamsa together with State Administration Council Chairman Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and his wife Daw Kyu Kyu Hla and other military personnel.

State Administration Council Chairman and his wife and attendants took five precepts from State Sangha Maha Nayaka Chairman Bhamo Sayadaw.

Then, Presiding Sayadaw Baddanta Gandhama of Myoma Monastery in Bago, who will be conferred the title of Abhidhaja Maha Rattha Guru, delivered an oration followed by SAC Chairman Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and SAC Vice-Chairman Vice-Senior General Soe Win who presented Abhidhaja Maha Rattha Guru title to Presiding Sayadaw Baddanta Ayeindaka of Nyaung Pin Thar Monastery in Chanmyathazi Township of Magwe Region while General Mya Tun Oo to Sayadaw Baddanta Thaw Ya San Pya Monastery in Thingangyun Township of Yangon Region, SAC Secretary Lt-Gen Yew Win Oo to Sayadaw Baddanta Phet Tun Oo, to Sayadaw Baddanta Sarmi in MraukU of Rakhine Region, SAC Joint-Secretary Lt-Gen Ye Win Oo to Sayadaw Baddanta Pinyavamsa of Swede Thau Wun Monastery in Thangyangnyen of Yangon Region by Constitutional Tribunal Chairman U Than Kyaw, to Sayadaw Baddanta Kumara of Zeya Theikdi Monastery in Insein Township of Yangon Region by NEC Chairman U Thein Soe.

Similarly, Abhidhaja Agga Maha Saddhamma Jotika title and accessories were presented to Sayadaw Baddanta Sudannara of Asha Kyaung Monastery in Kyauktan of Yangon Region by Union Minister Lt-Gen Tun Tun Naung to Sayadaw Baddanta Marlar Bhivamsa of Alal Taw Ya San Pya Monastery in Bahan Township of Yangon Region, Union Minister U Win Shein to Sayadaw Dr Baddanta Agga of Pali Kayi Monastery in Thakayta Township of Yangon Region.

Then, SAC Chairman and his wife and the audiences listened to the sermon of State Sangha Maha Nayaka Thanlyin Min Kyaung Pahtamayan monastery patron Agga Maha Pandita Agga Maha Jotikadhaja Dr Baddanta Candima Bhivamsa and shared merit for the donations made.

During the ceremony, a total of 13 Sayadaws were conferred with the title of Abhidhaja Maha Rattha Guru and 7 Sayadaws with Abhidhaja Agga Maha Saddhamma Jotika for the year 2021. — MNA
Parade of 76th Anniversary Armed Forces Day held
State Administration Council Chairman Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services
Senior General Maha Thray Sithu Min Aung Hlaing delivers address

The families of the Tatmadaw Armed Forces (Army, Navy and Air Force) paid obeisance to the retired Tatmadaw senior officers, who attended the 76th Armed Forces Day parade yesterday afternoon in Nay Pyi Taw.

Senior officers and wives from the Office of the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces (Army, Navy and Air) led by Coordinating Commander (Army, Navy and Air) General Mauk Maung Aye and his wife attended the ceremony to pay tribute to the Tatmadaw senior officers and wives.

On behalf of the State Administration Council’s Chairman Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, Coordinating Commander (Army, Navy and Air) General Maung Maung Aye addressed the ceremony.

On behalf of the retired Tatmadaw officers, General Thura Saw Phyu (retired) and Lt-Gen Tun Kyi (retired) gave remarks after receiving the attendees’ obeisance.

The Coordinating Commander (Army, Navy and Air) and the attended Tatmadaw officials respectfully presented the gifts to the retired senior Tatmadaw officers.—MNA

Tatmadaw families are paying obeisance to retired senior officers yesterday.
Public transportation services are essential for the smooth flow of goods and trading, which people rely on for their livelihood.

The SARS-CoV-2 virus has already undergone several thousand mutations since it emerged in humans in late 2019.

Some variants, which people rely on for their livelihood.

The SARS-CoV-2 virus has already undergone several thousand mutations since it emerged in humans in late 2019.

More contagious?

Viruses normally accumulate mutations over time as the appearance of variants is not at all surprising. Most of these changes will not have a direct benefit to the virus or other public health impacts, according to the WHO. It all depends on the mutations they carry.

The English, South African and Brazilian variants all share a particular mutation — namely N501Y — that is thought to increase infections. The mutation occurs on the virus’s spike protein, which allows it to enter human cells and multiply faster, said Olivier Schwartz, head of the Pasteur Institute’s virus and immunity unit. Researchers at Harvard University are investigating another possibility. They are looking at the idea that the English variant could lead to extended COVID-19 infections, making individuals more contagious for longer.

That turns out to be the case, “a longer isolation period than the currently recommend ed 10 days after symptom onset must be needed,” the researchers concluded. But it will take several weeks or even months to get definitive answers.

More dangerous?

British authorities said in January that the strain that emerged in England was up to 40 percent more deadly, based on a number of studies in the UK. One of which was published in the BMJ medical journal in March, found that the variant was 44 percent more deadly than pre-existing strains.

For 1,000 cases detected, the English variant causes 4.1 deaths, against 2.5 for the classic coronavirus, A study said. Additionally, the WHO estimates that the South African variant “increases the risk of death in hospital by 28 per cent”, based on research in the country.

Are vaccines still effective?

Several studies have shown that while vaccines maintain their effectiveness against the English variant, they may have a weaker effect on the South African and Brazilian strains, because of the E484K mutation. However, scientists say that does not mean that they are not effective at all. Also, three studies focus on a single response of the body after vaccination — the production of antibodies. They do “not assess other types of potential immunity, such as memory T and B-cell activity,” said a group of US scientists, including government expert Anthony Fauci, in an article recently published in the journal JAMA.

Meanwhile, manufacturers are working on updated vaccines, tailored to the variants. Moderna announced in March that it was testing a new generation of vaccine in a clinical trial to evaluate their effectiveness against the South African variant.

As long as case figures remain high globally, the chances of significant mutations will also stay elevated. This is why experts say it is crucial to vaccinate as many people as quickly as possible in order to limit the risk of new variants emerging. So measures such as distancing and mask wearing will continue to be vital, even as more and more people receive a vaccine.

SOURCE: AFP
Step up in police checks on travellers amid ‘critical’ virus situation

The French government announced increased police checks on Friday to enforce travel restrictions in place in Paris and several other regions as coronavirus cases continue to soar around the country. PHOTO: AFP

Madrid: Haven for fun-starved Europeans but locals can’t leave

WITH bars and restaurants open and its 11:00 pm curfew, Madrid has become a highly-prized haven for hoards of leisure-starved Europeans in a reality that has stranded residents who remain restricted from leaving the region.

“We left France to come to Madrid and it’s completely surreal to drink a beer on a terrace when Paris is in lockdown... it’s magical!” smiles Mathieu de Carvalho, a 22-year-old student who landed in the city just two hours ago.

Visiting with three friends, he raises his glass, the tables around him packed with people on a warm spring evening.

Since the end of the first national lockdown in June 2020, Madrid has kept its doors firmly open to foreign visitors with a steady stream of tourists coming to enjoy the sense of normality at its museums, bars, restaurants and theatres.

And it’s not only in the Spanish capital.

With Easter on the horizon, large numbers of German tourists are expected to fly into Mallorca in the coming days, one of their favourite haunts in the Balearic Islands.

But it’s a reality which has annoyed and angered Spaniards who are banned from leaving their own regions until April 9 to avoid a resurgence of Covid infections over Holy Week, with the number of people in intensive care now standing at 4,766, not far from the peak during the second wave in November. — AFP

Louvre puts entire collection online

THE Louvre museum in Paris said Friday it has put nearly half a million items from its collection online for the public to visit free of charge.

As part of a major revamp of its online presence, the world’s most-visited museum has created a new database of 482,000 items at collections.louvre.fr with more than three-quarters already labelled with information and pictures.

It comes after a year of pandemic-related shutdowns that has seen an explosion in visits to its main website, louvre.fr which has also been given a major makeover.

“It’s a step that has been in preparation for several years with the aim of serving the general public as well as researchers. Accessibility is at the heart of our mission,” said president-director Jean-Luc Martinez.

The new database includes not only items on public display in the museum but also those in storage, including at its new state-of-the-art facility at Lens in northern France.

The platform also includes the Delacroix museum, which is run by the Louvre, as well as sculptures from the neighbouring Tuileries gardens and works recovered from Germany since the end of the war in 1945 that are waiting to be restored to the families from which they were looted.

The museum announced earlier this month that it would intensify its efforts to restore items looted from Jewish families by the Nazi regime. — AFP

Kenya imposes Nairobi lockdown, closes schools

KENYAN President Uhuru Kenyatta on Friday placed Nairobi and several nearby counties under a partial lockdown, and closed schools and bars in those areas, in an effort to contain the spread of Covid-19.

In a national address, Kenyatta ordered “that there shall be cessation of all movement by road, rail, or air into and out of the disease infected area... effective midnight tonight” in Nairobi and four other counties where cases are rising fast. — AFP

Ireland starts mandatory hotel travel quarantine

IRELAND began enforcing a mandatory hotel quarantine for travellers arriving in the state from 33 “high risk” countries on Friday in a bid to quash the spread of new coronavirus variants.

The government website said “all passengers arriving into Ireland from designated states... are now required to pre-book accommodation in a designated quarantine facility”.

The quarantine – announced by the government two months ago – came into effect at 4:00 am (0400 GMT), the site confirmed. — AFP

Compared with much of the rest of Europe, the Covid-19 atmosphere in Spain feels like a fiesta. PHOTO: AFP

THE GLOBAL NEW LIGHT OF MYANMAR

Thailand to lift tourist quarantine for popular beach island

THAILAND on Friday announced plans for an experimental quarantine-free model in ultra-popular beach destination Phuket, as the kingdom attempts to resuscitate its pandemic-battered economy.

The island has imposed massive restrictions and visitor arrivals in order to stem coronavirus, but discouraging tourism has led to its economy recording the worst performance since the 1997 Asian financial crisis.

The impact has reverberated across the country’s services sectors – bruising entertainment, retail, hotels and restaurants. — AFP
EU regulator backs Pfizer vaccine storage at regular freezer temperature

VIALS of Pfizer/BioNTech’s coronavirus vaccine can be kept at normal freezer temperatures for short periods instead of in ultra-cold storage, the EU’s drugs regulator said Friday.

The change would help the “rapid roll-out” of vaccines across Europe, where vaccination campaigns are stalling due to supply and logistical issues, the European Medicines Agency said in a statement.

The EU regulator had “given a positive opinion to allow transportation and storage of vials of this vaccine at temperatures between -25 to -15 degrees Celsius (-13 to 5 Fahrenheit) for a one-off period of two weeks.”

The EMA said this was the “temperature of standard pharmaceutical freezers.”

“This is an alternative to the long-term storage of the vials at a temperature between -90 to -60 degrees Celsius in special freezers” the Amsterdam-based watchdog added in a statement.

“It is expected to facilitate the rapid roll-out and distribution of the vaccine in the EU by reducing the need for ultra-low temperature cold storage conditions throughout the supply chain.” — AFP

PANDEMIC: WORLD

German business looks past virus to start spring upbeat

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“It was the best score since June 2020,” Ifo president Clemens Fuest said in a statement. — AFP

“100 per cent Brazilian” vaccine announced

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Butantan is the largest vaccine producer in Brazil and makes the CoroVac shot produced by Chinese firm SinoVac — the most widely used against the pandemic in the South American country.

ButanVac will also be produced in Thailand and Vietnam and distributed to poorer countries. — AFP

Italy to restrict anti-vax health workers

ITALIAN Prime Minister Mario Draghi said on Friday the government would take action against healthcare workers who refuse to be vaccinated against coronavirus, following new reports of infections in hospitals. “The government intends to intervene,” Draghi told a press conference. “It’s absolutely not good that unvaccinated workers are in contact with sick people.”

The prime minister said Justice Minister Marta Cartabia was preparing regulation, likely a decree, but the details have not yet been determined.

On Thursday, Liguria region President Giovanni Toti called for a national law after at least 12 people were infected with coronavirus at two hospitals in the area due to two unvaccinated health workers. — AFP

PANDEMIC: WORLD

Vaccine leader Chile wrestles with rising Covid infection rate

CHILE is a world leader in its coronavirus vaccination program and has already given at least one dose to almost a third of its population.

By Thursday the narrow South American nation, hemmed in by the Andes mountains and the Pacific ocean, had given more than six million people a single dose and 3.1 million both doses, including most over-70s.

And yet that same day, the government put more than 80 per cent of the country’s 19 million people in lockdown.

With new virus variants, believed to be more contagious, spreading across the continent, cases have been soaring in Chile despite its vaccination drive.

On Thursday it passed 7,000 new cases in the previous 24 hours, the second highest daily figure recorded.

“They are phenomena that run on totally different tracks,” Darwin Acuna, the president of Chile’s society of intensive medicine, told AFP about the seeming disconnect between high vaccination and contagion rates.

President Sebastian Pinera has urged the country to make “a last effort” and authorities expect the vaccination push to start bearing fruit next month.

Health Minister Enrique Paris said the lockdown “is tough but necessary,” particularly in the Santiago metropolitan area — the most populous in Chile.

The country has recorded more than 950,000 infections and over 22,500 deaths from Covid.

‘More aggressive’ wave

Chile began vaccinating health care workers on December 24 and from February 3 it started with the general population, initially the over 90s. — AFP

Pandemic fuels travel boom — in virtual reality

JEM Jenkins Jones was stuck at home in Wales for much of the past year amid pandemic lockdowns but managed to fulfil a promise to her 10-year-old daughter to see the northern lights from Iceland and South Africa’s game reserves — in virtual reality. “She was amazed,” she said, calling the VR travel experiences “a lifesaver for us.”

Strict lockdowns and travel limitations during the pandemic have sparked fresh interest in immersive virtual travel experiences, which have become more accessible and affordable with new apps and VR hardware.

Even those confined to their homes can take a virtual jaunt to Machu Picchu, the rainforests of Borneo or a road trip across the United States in a convertible.

Data on VR travel usage is limited but developers have seen surging interest since the pandemic hit.

“It has been skyrocketing,” said Cezara Windrem, creator of the Alcove VR platform at AARP Innovation Labs. “We’re getting more adoption every month.” Alcove enables users to visit exotic locales such as Australia’s coral reef or the island of Malta, while adding a “shared” experience which enables people to interact and even “lead” a family member without the technical skills to navigate in a VR headset.

“We’ve heard from a lot of people who discovered Alcove and decided buy a headset for their elderly family members,” Windrem said.

This allows for shared travel even during a lockdown and other kinds of experiences such as “playing chess with someone on the other side of the planet.” — AFP

This illustration picture shows a virtual road trip on a computer and the travel application logo from Alcove, a platform for virtual reality travel.

A soldier checks a pedestrian at a checkpoint in the Chilean capital Santiago as the country imposes a Covid-19 lockdown — despite encouraging vaccination rates. PHOTO: AFP

Fujifilm vaccine offers 97 per cent protection in preventing symptomatic disease. PHOTO: AFP

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UK, Chinese scientists confirm Beijing’s air quality has improved significantly

BELJING’S air quality has improved significantly in the last few years thanks to the emission reductions following the implementation of clean air actions, according to the latest report released by the Atmospheric Pollution and Human Health (APHH) in a Chinese Megacity (APHH-Beijing) programme that unites British and Chinese scientists.

The APHH-Beijing program was funded by Britain’s Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) and Medical Research Council (MRC) as part of the UK-China Research and Innovation Partnership Fund, and the National Natural Science Foundation of China (NSFC).

A team of more than 150 scientists spent five years conducting one of the largest air pollution field campaigns in Beijing, generating new insight into air pollution and human health using novel observational and modelling tools, said a press statement on the website of the University of Birmingham.

The scientists have found that sources of key air pollutants in the city center, including fine particles, volatile organic compounds (VOC), and black carbon are much lower than predicted basing on the still relatively high concentrations in 2016 and 2017.

“We confirmed that Beijing’s air quality has improved significantly in recent years,” said Professor Roy Harrison, lead UK principal investigator of the largest project within APHH-Beijing (AIRPOLL), from the University of Birmingham. — Xinhua

Guatemala’s Pacaya volcano continues erupting after 50 days

THE Pacaya volcano close to Guatemala’s capital is maintaining “high levels” of activity with strong eruptions, ash clouds and rivers of lava spewing out, officials said on Friday.

The 2,500-metre (8,200-foot) volcano that lies 25 kilometres to the south of Guatemala City has been erupting for 50 days, damaging plantations in the path of the lava.

Pacaya is expelling ash up to 500 metres from its crater, located 2.5 kilometres southwest of the cone, the vulcanology institute said in a statement.

Falling ash was registered in the El Rodeo and El Patrocinio communities, the institute said, adding that “the volcanic activity is considered at high levels.”

The activity has produced a lava flow 2.2 kilometres long on the west flank of the volcano.

The national disaster coordination body said the lava had caused “fire and the destruction of coffee and avocado plantations.”

Despite the spectacular eruptions, inhabitants of the surrounding villages have chosen to stay at home.

The civil protection body has asked authorities to prohibit people from approaching either the crater or the lava flows due to the risk of falling debris.

On Tuesday, a change in wind direction forced the closure of the country’s only international airport for almost 24 hours due to ash.

A powerful eruption of the Pacaya volcano in May 2010 killed a television journalist and a lot of food.” — AFP

US authorities probing alarming spike in manatee deaths

US authorities are investigating an alarming increase in manatee deaths in Florida, after the bodies of more than 500 of the giant marine mammals have been found so far this year — 349 more than died in all of 2020.

Nearly 340 dead manatees were found in Florida waters just between January 1 and March 19, according to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC).

That is almost as many manatee deaths as were counted in the last three years combined. About 175 manatees usually die in Florida every year. The FWC said in a statement Wednesday that the situation could now be classed as an Unusual Mortality Event (UME).

“Preliminary information indicates that a reduction in food availability is a contributing factor,” the commission’s statement said.

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, a UME is defined as an event that “involves a significant die-off of any marine mammal population; and demands immediate response,” in accordance with the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

“The FWC will continue to coordinate closely with our federal partners, participate in the investigative team and conduct analyses into the cause of the UME,” the agency said. — AFP

Russia hails rare sighting of Amur leopard mum with cubs

RUSSIAN conservationists hailed Friday a rare sighting of an Amur leopard mother with three cubs in the Far East as proof of the efficiency of the country’s efforts to boost the population of the endangered species. Scientists in a Russian national park located in the Primorye region on the border with China obtained the stunning images using a remote camera trap.

The video footage shows the feline family standing on top of a hill in the Land of the Leopard National Park.

In the video, the young mother, identified as Leo 117F, is seen spotting a mystery animal and then leaving the scene, apparently walking closer towards it.

Soon her cubs also discover the animal and begin to watch their mother’s interaction with the “intruder” intently, the park said. None appeared to be afraid.

Ivan Rakov, spokesman for the national park, said it was the first time that Leo 117F, who is believed to be four years old, had been caught on video with her cubs.

“We’ve discovered that she has been able to raise a family,” Rakov told AFP from the Pacific port city of Vladivostok.

“This is her first litter.”

He said raising three cubs at once in Russia’s taiga was no mean feat and required a “lot of space and a lot of food.” — AFP
COVID-19 cuts jobs, boosts stocks, widening economic gap in Japan

THE coronavirus pandemic has brought significant economic impacts in Japan, with the widening gap between the rich and the poor being a prime example. The pandemic has cost many jobs, especially in the dining and travel industries, while stock and other asset markets are booming on the back of global monetary easing.

At Isetan department store in Tokyo’s Shinjuku district, which posts the highest sales of all department stores in Japan, a jewelry buyer calls strong sales last summer “mysterious.”

“Despite a lack of exuberance at the store, we experienced very high sales,” the buyer said, recalling the situation after the government lifted the country’s first state of emergency over COVID-19 last May. Main customers were the store’s wealthy regulars and the so-called “new rich,” including young managers of information technology firms and YouTubers who increased their earnings by taking advantage of the pandemic. Such customers apparently had already chosen what to shop during the stay-at-home period and just wanted a final check of shapes and weights of the goods at the store.

Jewellery worth several million yen was sold on the fly, the buyer said. Sales of luxury import cars priced over 10 million yen ($92,000) and higher were also brisk. Sales totaled 22,712 units in 2020, surpassing year-earlier levels.

“Buying things whenever they want is what we call rich people,” said a person involved in the auto industry. “Situations around them do not necessarily affect them.”

Massive stimulus and monetary easing measures by Japan, the United States, Europe and elsewhere to bolster pandemic-hit economies have sharply boosted asset prices.

Germany ratifies €750bn EU virus recovery fund

EU virus recovery fund

UK retail sales attempt recovery from lockdown slump: ONS

BRITISH retail sales recovered somewhat in February, helped by demand for home improvements and garden items from locked-down consumers, official data showed on Friday. Sales by volume rose 2.1 per cent in February from January, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) said in a statement.

The ONS noted that sales “only partly recovered” last month after an 8.2-per cent slump in January on the back of England’s third round of virus curbs.

Sales of household goods jumped 16.1 per cent in February. “Anecdotal evidence from household goods stores suggested that the monthly growth... could be attributed to the purchase of DIY products as consumers continue to improve their homes during lockdown,” the ONS said.

Retailers also noted that there was evidence of consumers buying outdoor products earlier in preparation for the easing of lockdown restrictions, particularly the ability to meet friends and relatives in private gardens as the weather improved.

Nevertheless, overall sales remain 3.7 per cent lower than the same month a year earlier, just before the eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic.

BOJ to begin feasibility study on digital currency in April

THE Bank of Japan said Friday it will begin a feasibility study on digital currency next month, accelerating preparation for the issuance of its own virtual currency following swift moves by China and some other countries to do the same.

Although the BOJ said it “currently has no plan to issue central bank digital currency,” or CBDC, it will gear up preparation as part of its efforts to swiftly supply the virtual unit when needed. The central bank will first test the technical feasibility of the core functions and features required for the digital currency, which is expected to be used for cashless payments via smartphones or electronic cards.

“There is a reasonable possibility for CBDC to provide a means of payments and for such systems to become global standards,” BOJ Executive Director Shinichi Uehida said Friday at the first meeting held online with participants of the experiment, including financial and fintech industry representatives.

Australia threatens WTO action as China hikes duty on wine

AUSTRALIA’s trade minister threatened to take China to the World Trade Organization on Saturday over its “unjustifiable” decision to hike duties on Australian wine imports for up to five years. In the latest salvo between Beijing and Canberra, China’s commerce ministry announced levies ranging from 116.2 per cent to 218.4 per cent would be slapped on Australian wine imports from Sunday.

Trade Minister Dan Tehan said the tariffs meant it was “basically impossible” for Australian wine to be competitive in the Chinese market. “This decision which has been taken by the Chinese government is extremely disappointing and completely unjustifiable,” Tehan told reporters in Melbourne. —AFP

The court gave only the first alphabet of each of the challengers’ names. The far-right AFD party had vowed to fight passage of the EU fund.

Lawmakers’ approval of the huge fund marked a breach in a German taboo against pooled debt.

German leaders have argued that it was necessary to get the bloc back on the road to growth after a pandemic that has ravaged the economy.

“The vote is a clear signal for European solidarity and strength,” said Finance Minister Olaf Scholz, stressing that it was in Germany’s interest that the entire bloc emerged strong from the crisis.

Non-essential retail, such as clothing sales, suffered the largest slump in February, with volumes down 50.4% compared with a year earlier.

PHOTO: KYODO

Biden invites 40 world leaders, including PM Modi, to virtual climate summit

US President Joe Biden has invited 40 world leaders, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi, to the Leaders’ Summit on Climate to underscore the urgency and the economic benefits of stronger climate action, the White House said. The two-day summit will be held virtually on April 22-23 and will be telecasted live for public viewing.

“Situation is normal,” he said. The disturbances came as Bangladesh marked 50 years of independence with rights groups calling for an end to extra-judicial killings.

President Joe Biden is directing the U.S. to rejoin the international Paris Climate Agreement, which aims to cut global greenhouse gas emissions. Here, activists rally on Dec. 12, 2015. PHOTO: AFP

3 Russian nuclear subs emerge from under Arctic ice for 1st time

Three nuclear-powered missile submarines broke thick ice and surfaced in the Arctic Ocean simultaneously for the first time in the history of the Russian Navy, Navy Commander-in-Chief Nikolai Yevmenov said Friday.

The submarines shattered 1.5-metre-thick ice and ascended to the frozen sea surface at the same time in an area with a radius of 300 metres, Yevmenov reported to Russian President Vladimir Putin via video link.

“Situation is normal,” he said.

The summit will reconvene the US-led Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate, which brings together 17 countries responsible for approximately 80 per cent of global emissions and global GDP. Biden also invited the heads of other countries that are demonstrating strong climate leadership, especially vulnerable to climate impacts, are charting innovative pathways to a net-zero economy. A small number of business and civil society leaders will also participate in the summit, the White House said.

Key themes of the summit will include galvanizing efforts by the world’s major economies to reduce emissions during this critical decade to keep a limit to warming of 1.5 degree Celsius within reach. The summit will also highlight examples of how enhanced climate ambition will create good paying jobs, advance innovative technologies and help vulnerable countries adapt to climate impacts, it added.

By the time of the summit, the United States will announce an ambitious 2030 emissions target as its new Nationally Determined Contribution under the Paris Agreement, the White House said.

In his invitation, Biden urged leaders to use the summit as an opportunity to outline how their countries also will contribute to stronger climate ambition, it said.

O r e a l n e t w o r k . c o m

Biden deploys border guards after deadly anti-Modi protests

Bangladesh has deployed border guards to help maintain order, a senior officer said Saturday after deadly protests by hardline Islamists against a visit by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The violence, which began Friday at the main mosque in the capital Dhaka, spread to several key districts in the South Asian nation of 168 million, leaving five people dead and scores injured.

Facebook has been restricted in the country, a company spokesman said after users complained they could not access the site since late Friday afternoon as images and reports of the violence were shared in social media.

A spokesman for the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), which also acts as a reserve paramilitary force to maintain law and order, said it had deployed troops since Friday night.

“With the instructions of the home ministry and in aid of the civil administration, required number of BGB has been deployed in different districts of the country,” Lieutenant Colonel Fayzur Rahman told AFP, without disclosing the numbers involved.

Rahman, who is the operations director of the force, said there had been no reports of violence after their deployment.

“The disturbances came as Bangladesh marked 50 years of independence with rights groups calling for an end to growing authoritarianism including forced disappearances and extra-judicial killings,” the spokesman said.

Police said four bodies of members of Hifazat-e-Islam, a hardline Islamist group, were brought to Chittagong Medical College Hospital after violence erupted at Hathazari, a rural town where the group’s main leaders are based.—AFP

PHOTO: AFP

Five people were killed Friday during clashes between police and activists of the Hifazat-e-Islam group protesting against Indian Prime minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Bangladesh. PHOTO: AFP

PHOTO: RUSSIAN MOD/F I L E

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The maneuver was part of the “Umka-2021” (meaning polar bear) comprehensive Arctic expedition that the Russian Navy has been carrying out in the Franz Josef Land archipelago since March 20.

More than 600 military and civilian personnel, and about 200 pieces of military and special equipment and weapons are involved in the expedition, Yevmenov said, adding that the “Umka-2021” includes 43 events, with 35 of them having been completed.

Two MiG-31 fighters flew past the geographic point of the North Pole with refueling in the air, he said.—AFP
US children's author Beverly Cleary dead at 104

AMERICAN children's author Beverly Cleary, the creator of iconic characters including Ramona Quimby and Henry Huggins, has died at 104, her publisher said Friday.

The librarian-turned-writer died on Thursday in Carmel, California, her home since the 1960s, Harper Collins Publishers said in a statement.

With titles like "Henry Huggins" (1950) and "Ramona and Her Father," (1978) beloved by generations of young readers, Cleary's works explored everyday life through the eyes of children. And she did it with wit and sympathy, touching on topics ranging from lunchroom antics and sibling rivalries to a parent's job loss.

Cleary was inspired to start writing when "a little boy faced me rather ferociously across the circulation desk and said: 'Where are the books about kids like us?"' her publisher quoted her as saying. "I wanted to read about the sort of boys and girls that I knew in my neighbourhood and in my school," she told NPR in 1999.

"And in my childhood, many years ago, children's books seemed to be about English children, or pioneer children. And that wasn't what I wanted to read. And I think children like to find themselves in books." —AFP

Egypt train collision kills 32

A collision between two trains killed at least 32 people and left more than 160 injured Friday in southern Egypt, a country plagued by fatal rail accidents widely blamed on crumbling infrastructure and poor maintenance.

President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi pledged tough punishment for those responsible for the crash, which came as his government wrestles with demand for greater "accountability" for greater "accountability" racism, bullying and resulting racism, abuse.

Medical reinforcements were routed from Cairo and more than a hundred ambulances were mobilized to transport the injured to hospital from the scene in the Tahta district of southern Egypt, 460 kilometres (285 miles) south of the capital.

The health ministry gave an updated casualty toll of at least 32 dead and 165 people hospitalised with injuries, 70 per cent of them fractures. Dozens of technicians were working through Friday evening to remove five dislocated and damaged train wagons, an AFP correspondent on the scene said.

"We were at the mosque then a child came and told us (about the incident). We heard the collision, so we rushed and found the carnage," said one witness, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"The first ambulances arrived around half an hour after the explosion... there were children who removed (debris) using wooden ladders," the source, who spent the day helping the rescue workers, said.

Surveillance camera footage of the accident seen by AFP showed a carriage being violently thrown into the air in a cloud of dust when a speeding train rammed into another as it rolled slowly down the tracks. —AFP

Mexican child, 9, dies trying to enter US: border patrol

A nine-year-old Mexican child died while trying to cross the Rio Grande River into the United States, the Border Patrol said on Friday amid a surge in migrants seeking to enter the country.

The child was found together with a Guatemalan woman and her three-year-old, all unconscious and stranded on an island in the middle of the river which demarcates the US-Mexico border in Texas on March 29.

"Agents found the individuals and immediately began administering first aid while transporting the migrants to shore," the Border Patrol said in a statement that did not state the deceased child's gender.

The woman and the three-year-old regained consciousness but the nine-year-old could not be revived.

The three, who were not identified, were some of the 300 migrants rescued from dangerous situations in the past five months as thousands attempt to cross the border every day.

A senior Border Patrol official said on Friday that the numbers continue to increase: some 6,000 undocumented migrants were caught on Thursday trying to enter the country. Unlike in the past, when most of those caught crossing the southern border illegally were single adults, most recently about half have been either in family units or as unaccompanied children. —AFP

Asylum seekers await transport by U.S. Border Patrol agents after their group of immigrants crossed the Rio Grande into Texas on March 25, 2021 in Hidalgo, Texas. PHOTO: AFP

French football legend Thierry Henry quits social media over 'toxic' racism, abuse

FORMER French national team striker Thierry Henry has said he is quitting all social media after a surge in migrants seeking to enter the country.

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Beverly Cleary (2nd R) is pictured with president George W. Bush (center) in this November 12, 2003 photo, along with other recipients of the National Medal of Art (from L) blues musician Buddy Guy, dancer Suzanne Farrell and director Ron Howard. PHOTO: AFP

French oil giant Total is the principal investor in the $20 billion (16.9 billion euros) project — Africa's largest — with six other international firms including ExxonMobil involved in the area. The militants began a raid on the coastal town on Wednesday afternoon, forcing terrified residents to flee into surrounding forest as LNG and government workers sought shelter.

Asylum seekers await transport by U.S. Border Patrol agents after their group of immigrants crossed the Rio Grande into Texas on March 25, 2021 in Hidalgo, Texas. PHOTO: AFP

A surge in migrants seeking to enter the United States has put an added strain on highway patrol units or as unaccompanied children. —AFP

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A surge in migrants seeking to enter the United States has put an added strain on highway patrol units or as unaccompanied children. —AFP
THE global football body FIFA will decide the upcoming hosts for the Women’s World Cup following a videoconference meeting held this week.

“Until now, the decision has been taken by the FIFA Council, most recently in June 2020 when the hosting rights for the 2023 edition were awarded to Australia and New Zealand. As FIFA seeks to raise the profile of the women’s game, this represents a significant step to bring the FIFA Women’s World Cup in line with the flagship men’s competition, the FIFA World Cup,” FIFA authorities said.

“The FIFA Council recognized that the highest priority in football is the health of the players, and therefore the discussion around the release of players for international duty must maintain this perspective, especially as the public health situation develops around the world. The Bureau of the FIFA Council had extended to April 2021, the temporary amendments to the Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players regarding the release of players for international duty; and FIFA, the confederations, and FIFA’s member associations remain in dialogue with national authorities about exemptions from quarantine rules for national team players”, the officials added. —GNLM

IOC slashes guest list for Tokyo Olympics

THE number of guests at the Tokyo Olympics will be reduced as will non-essential staff, the International Olympic Committee said Friday, mirroring the decision by Japan to ban overseas spectators from attending the summer showpiece. PHOTO: AFP

The number of guests at the Tokyo Olympics will be reduced as will non-essential staff, the International Olympic Committee said Friday, mirroring the decision by Japan to ban overseas spectators from attending the summer showpiece.

“The International Olympic Committee Executive Board has decided to grant accreditation only to people who have essential and operational roles at the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020,” the IOC said in a statement.

“This will significantly reduce the number of accredited people at the Games. It will be implemented by reducing a number of programmes, including the IOC Guest Programme.”

The decision is a further consequence of staging the Games during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Tokyo Games should have been held in 2020 but were put back a year due to the spread of the coronavirus. They will be staged in the Japanese capital from July 23 until August 8.

Friday’s decision also affects the Paralympics which will also be held in Tokyo. — AFP

USA, Mexico eye Tokyo Olympic berths in CONCACAF semi-finals

THE United States and Mexico will look to seal Olympic berths Sunday when they headline the semi-finals of the qualifying tournament for North and Central America and the Caribbean.

The United States will take on Honduras and Mexico faces Canada in the semi-finals at Estadio Jalisco, with both finalists punching their tickets to the Tokyo Games. Mexico emerged as winners of Group A with a 1-0 victory over the USA on Wednesday. Both teams had beaten Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic in earlier group matches, making their clash one for group bragging rights only. But it was a sobering moment for a US squad trying to get the country back into the Olympics for the first time since 2008. “The next game is the one we have to win,” US manager Jason Kreis said after the Mexico defeat. “It’s all still there for us. Nothing has changed.” The US-Honduras contest is a rematch of the October 2015 qualification game won by Honduras 2-0. Honduras coach Miguel Falero said he expected a strong challenge from a US side determined to return to the Games, but Honduran midfielder Edwin Rodriguez was confident. “Nobody wants to miss these big events like the Olympic Games,” Rodriguez said. “We have what it takes.”

—AFP

UEFA to make Champions League reforms decision on Wednesday: European Leagues

UEFA will decide next week on a revised format for the Champions League which will likely overhaul Europe’s top football competition from 2024, European Leagues revealed on Friday. “The new pre-knockout stage would consist of one single table with clubs taking part in a so-called ‘Swiss system’ inspired by chess, in which teams play 10 matches instead of the current six. One of the four new entrants is expected to be a fourth team from France’s Ligue 1, and one of the key issues regarding the new format is how to decide on the other three.”

—AFP

UEFA has put forward plans for a new format from 2024 featuring one 36-team league replacing the current group stage. PHOTO: AFP

UEFA to decide future hosts of Women’s World Cup

THE global football body FIFA will decide the upcoming hosts for the Women’s World Cup following a videoconference meeting held this week.

“The FIFA Council had extended to April 2021, the temporary amendments to the Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players regarding the release of players for international duty; and FIFA, the confederations, and FIFA’s member associations remain in dialogue with national authorities about exemptions from quarantine rules for national team players”, the officials added. —GNLM

UEFA will decide next week on a revised format for the Champions League which will likely overhaul Europe’s top football competition from 2024, European Leagues revealed on Friday. Lars-Christer Olsson, the president of a body which brings together professional leagues and club associations from 30 European nations, told reporters that UEFA would make its decision “during its executive committee on (Wednesday) March 31”.

Olsson said the meeting will be preceded the previous day by a “club competitions commission” charged with defining the details of the reforms.

Among the potential changes are an increase of participating clubs from 32 to 36 and the end of the current group stage, in which teams are divided up into eight sets of four.

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