

News in brief

Beijing, Shenzhen loosen more COVID curbs as China fine-tunes policy



Beijing residents cheered the removal of COVID-19 testing booths while Shenzhen said it would no longer require commuters to present test results to travel, as an easing of China's virus curbs gathered pace. Although daily cases are near all-time highs, some cities are taking steps to loosen COVID testing requirements and quarantine rules as China looks to make its zero-COVID policy more targeted amid a sharp economic slowdown and public frustration that has boiled over into unrest. The southern city of Shenzhen announced it would no longer require people to show a negative COVID test result to use public transport or enter parks, following similar moves by Chengdu and Tianjin.

Former US intelligence contractor Edward Snowden, who exposed the scale of secret surveillance by the National Security Agency (NSA), has sworn an oath of allegiance to Russia and received a Russian passport, TASS reported.

"Yes, he got [a passport], he took the oath," Anatoly Kucherenko, Snowden's lawyer, told the state news agency TASS. "This is still a criminal investigative matter," White House spokesman John Kirby told reporters, referring any questions about the report on Snowden to the U.S. Department of Justice, which declined to comment. US authorities have for years wanted Snowden returned to the United States to face a criminal trial on espionage charges.

US whistleblower Snowden gets Russian passport



Europe would be in trouble without US - Finnish PM



Finnish PM Sanna Marin has said Europe is "not strong enough" to stand up to Russia's invasion of Ukraine on its own, and has had to rely on US support. During a visit to Australia, the leader of the pending Nato member said Europe's defences must be strengthened. "I must be brutally honest with you, Europe isn't strong enough right now," she said. "We would be in trouble without the United States." The US is by far the largest provider of military assistance to Ukraine. Speaking at the Lowy Institute think tank in Sydney, Marin said: "The United States has given a lot of weapons, a lot of financial aid, a lot of humanitarian aid to Ukraine and Europe isn't strong enough

Curioser & Curioser

People cut Banksy mural off battle-scarred Ukraine wall



Banksy's graffiti before it was destroyed

Reuters | Kyiv

A group of people tried to take a mural by graffiti artist Banksy in Ukraine by cutting it off a battle-scarred wall where it was painted, the governor of Kyiv region said.

The group managed to slice off a section of board and plaster bearing the image of a woman in a gas mask and dressing gown holding a fire extinguisher on the side of a scorched building.

But they were spotted at the scene in the city of Hostomel near Kyiv and the mural was retrieved, Oleksiy Kuleba said



The work is seen packed on December 2

in a statement.

The image was still intact and police were protecting it, he added.

"These images are, after all, symbols of our struggle against the enemy ... We'll do everything to preserve these works of street art as a symbol of our victory," he said.

Banksy, whose work can sell for millions of dollars on the art market, confirmed he had painted the mural and six others last month in places that were badly affected by heavy fighting after Russia invaded Ukraine in late February.

Drop in COVID alertness could create deadly new variant - WHO

Reuters | London

Lapses in strategies to tackle COVID-19 this year continue to create the perfect conditions for a deadly new variant to emerge, as parts of China witness a rise in infections, the head of the World Health Organization said.

The comments by WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus mark a change in tone just months after he said that the world has never been in a better position to end the pandemic.

"We are much closer to being able to say that the emergency phase of the pandemic is over,



WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus

but we're not there yet," Tedros said.

The global health agency estimates that about 90% of the world's population now has some level of immunity to SARS-COV-2 either due to prior

Gaps in testing ... and vaccination are continuing to create the perfect conditions for a new variant of concern to emerge that could cause significant mortality

TEDROS ADHANOM GHEBREYESUS

infection or vaccination.

"Gaps in testing ... and vaccination are continuing to create the perfect conditions for a new variant of concern to emerge that could cause significant mortality," Tedros said.

Indian state will proceed 'no matter what' with protest-hit Adani port-minister

Reuters | Kozhikode

India's Kerala state will proceed "no matter what" with a \$900 million port project and is open to deploying federal police if needed to protect it from protesters blocking construction, a government minister told Reuters yesterday.

The local fishing community, led by Catholic priests, has blocked construction of Vizhinjam port by Adani Group for almost four months, erecting a



Police officers stand guard near barricades during a protest rally by the supporters of the proposed Vizhinjam port project in Kerala

makeshift shelter at the port's entrance. The protesters say the huge project causes coastal erosion that has undermined their livelihoods, calling for a complete halt on the construction.

Adani Group, led by Asia's richest man Gautam Adani, and the Kerala government, which is shouldering two-thirds of the project cost with the federal government, have denied such

accusations. Clashes between police and protesters last weekend injured more than 100 people, including 64 police.

Although the protesters have refused to budge, Kerala's minister of ports, Ahammed Devarkovil, said the government of the southern state was hopeful of resolving the deadlock but there was no chance it would halt construction.

We want to complete the port project no matter what. No compromise can be made on that. Because these are civilians protesting, the government's position is to take this forward without inflicting any harm

KERALA'S MINISTER OF PORTS, AHAMMED DEVARKOVIL

Distant black hole is caught in the act of annihilating a star

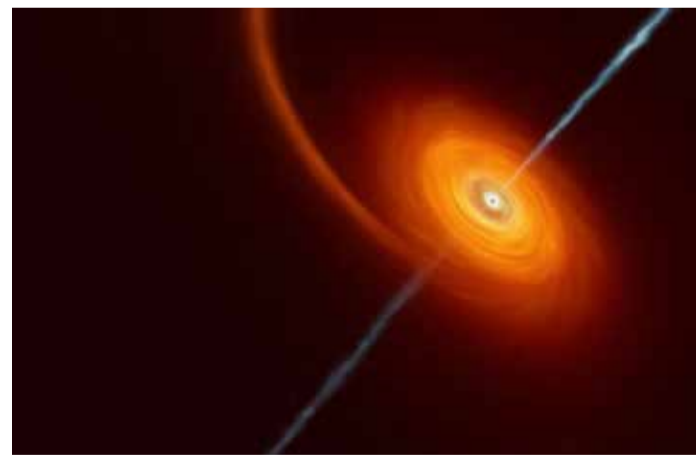
Reuters | Washington

Astronomers have detected an act of extreme violence more than halfway across the known universe as a black hole shreds a star that wandered too close to this celestial savage. But this was no ordinary instance of a ravenous black hole.

It was one of only four examples - and the first since 2011 - of a black hole observed in the act of tearing apart a passing star in what is called a tidal disruption event and then launching luminous jets of high-energy particles in opposite directions into space, researchers said. And it was both the furthest and brightest such event on record.

Astronomers described the event in studies published on Wednesday in the journals Nature and Nature Astronomy.

The culprit appears to be a



This undated artist's impression illustrates how it might look when a star approaches too close to a black hole, where the star is squeezed by the intense gravitational pull of the black hole. Some of the star's material gets pulled in and swirls around the black hole forming the disc that can be seen in this image. In rare cases, such as this one, jets of matter and radiation are shot out from the poles of the black hole

supermassive black hole believed to be hundreds of millions of times the mass of our sun located roughly 8.5 billion

light years away from Earth. A light year is the distance light travels in a year, 5.9 trillion miles (9.5 trillion km).

Ukraine squeeze

Russia says "will not"

Russia says it will continue to find buyers for its oil despite "dangerous" price caps

AP | Kyiv

The office of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy called yesterday for a lower price cap on Russia oil than the one agreed to by Ukraine's Western supporter while Russian authorities call the \$60-per-barrel cap harmful to free, stable markets.

Andriy Yermak, the head of Zelenskyy's office, wrote on social media that the price ceiling set by the European Union, Australia, Britain, Canada, Japan, and the United States on Friday didn't go far enough. The cap is set to take effect Monday, along with an embargo on Russian oil shipped by sea.

"It would be necessary to lower it to \$30 in order to destroy the enemy's economy faster," Yermak wrote on Telegram, staking out

World's oldest 1



Jonathan in the grounds of Plantation House

AFP | London

He was born not long after Napoleon died, and is now officially the planet's oldest known living land animal.

Jonathan the Seychelles Giant Tortoise is celebrating his 190th birthday - more or less - on Helena in the remote South Atlantic, where the defeated French emperor died in exile in 1821.

Jonathan, it is believed based on shell measurements, was hatched around 1832, and he was brought to the UK overseas territory of the Seychelles 50 years later.

He lives out a comfortable retirement in Plantation House, the official residence of the St Helena governor, where his birthday is being marked with events a weekend including the issuance of a special stamp.

The celebration climaxes on Sunday with a "birthday cake" made out of Jonathan's favourite foods.

He is particularly partial to ca