

News in brief

Sri Lanka considering restructure of local and sovereign debt



Sri Lanka is considering a restructure of local and sovereign debt, President Ranil Wickremesinghe said yesterday, as the island nation battles its worst financial crisis in its independent history. The country is due to restart bailout talks with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in August in the hope of securing \$3 billion in funding. The government is working with its financial and legal advisers Lazard and Clifford Chance to finalise a plan to restructure overseas debt, including about \$12 billion owed to bondholders.

Japanese Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi said yesterday

that Japan remains open to dialogue with China as keeping communications intact is all the more important when ties are strained. Hayashi's comment to reporters came after China on Thursday canceled a meeting between Hayashi and his Chinese counterpart, set to take place on the sidelines of an ASEAN meeting in Cambodia, due to its displeasure with a G7 statement urging Beijing to resolve the tension over Taiwan peacefully.

Japan remains open to dialogue with China, foreign minister says



Taiwan woman gets life sentence over blaze that killed 46



A Taiwanese woman who set off the island's deadliest fire in decades to get back at her boyfriend escaped the death penalty yesterday as the court handed down a life sentence. Last October's inferno in the southern city of Kaohsiung raged through multiple floors of a dilapidated 13-storey apartment block for hours, killing 46 people and injuring 41. Authorities had said the blaze started when the defendant Huang Ke-ke, 51, left unextinguished incense ashes on a sofa before leaving the building. Huang was indicted on murder and arson charges in January, with prosecutors seeking her execution.

The Malian army and "white-skinned soldiers"

were involved in the deaths of 33 civilians, according to an expert report to the UN. The bodies of 29 Mauritians and four Malians were found near the village of Robinet El Ataye in the Segou region, where 33 civilians had been beaten and taken away on March 5, a Panel of Experts on Mali said in a report to the UN Security Council late last month. A diplomatic source in New York told AFP that the white soldiers were paramilitaries of Russia's Wagner group.

Malian and 'white' soldiers involved in 33 civilian deaths: UN experts

Greek intelligence service boss quits amid wiretapping scandal

The head of Greece's intelligence service has stepped down, the prime minister's office said, following growing pressure on the government to shed light on the use of surveillance malware. EYP chief Panagiotis Kontoleon had submitted his resignation "following mistaken actions found during lawful wiretapping procedures," the prime minister's office said in a statement.

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COVID-19: Countries worst affected

Country	Total cases	Total deaths
1 USA	93,739,666	1,057,811
2 India	44,107,588	526,600
3 France	33,993,930	152,457
4 Brazil	33,964,494	679,594
5 Germany	31,178,705	144,717
6 UK	23,368,899	185,052
7 Italy	21,251,774	172,904
8 S. Korea	20,273,011	25,191
9 Russia	18,672,422	382,651
10 Turkey	15,889,495	99,341
11 Japan	13,598,290	33,159
12 Spain	13,245,996	110,719
13 Vietnam	11,192,043	43,094
14 Australia	9,586,984	12,201

Global tally
587,123,699
Deaths
6,431,586
Recovered:
557,233,131
New cases
+594,116
New deaths
+1,003

Middle East

Figures as of closing

Country	Total cases	new cases	Total deaths	New Deaths	Total recovered	Active cases
Egypt	515,645		24,613		442,182	48,850
Saudi Arabia	810,583	+189	9,257	+2	796,701	4,625
UAE	996,775	+998	2,337	+2	975,590	18,848
Kuwait	653,730		2,559		647,555	3,616
Oman	395,737		4,260		384,669	6,808
Qatar	412,897	+760	681		405,519	6,697

Thai nightclub fire kills 14, PM orders probe

AFP | Bangkok

Thailand's prime minister yesterday ordered an investigation into a massive blaze that tore through a nightclub, killing at least 14 people.

The fire broke out around 1:00 am (1800 GMT Thursday) at the Mountain B nightspot in Chonburi province's Sattahip district, about 150 kilometres (90 miles) southeast of Bangkok.

Video footage posted by a rescue service showed desperate revellers fleeing the club screaming, their clothes ablaze, as a huge fire raged in the background.

Chalit Chotisupakarn, who escaped with burns to his arms and torso, described scenes of panic and desperation as people struggled to get out of the building.

"I couldn't see anything, everything was dark. Everybody was shouting 'Get out! Get out!' We all had to try to get out," he told reporters.

"I just pushed and pushed. There were people with fire all over their bodies."

The Sawang Rojanathammasathan Rescue Foundation said 14 people were killed and around 40 injured.

The service said the blaze was accelerated by flammable acoustic foam on the walls of the club, and it took firefighters more than three hours to bring it under control.

Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha offered condolences to the victims' families and said he had ordered a probe into the fire.

The dead -- four women and 10 men -- were found mostly crowded by the entrance and in the bathroom, their bodies severely burned, the service said.

They were aged between 17 and 49 and all are believed to have been Thai.

"There is not death related to foreigners," police lieutenant



Major fire damage fills the interior at the Mountain B pub in the Sattahip district of Chonburi province



Concerns have long been raised about Thailand's lax approach to health and safety regulations, particularly in its countless bars and nightclubs

colonel Boonsong Yingyong of the Phlu Ta Luang police station, which oversees the area where the blaze occurred, told AFP by phone.

Charred wreck

One of the victims was the singer of the band playing at the club, his mother told local media.

"I don't know what to say. The death came all of a sudden," Premjai Sae-Oung told reporters.

She said a musician friend who managed to escape had told her the fire broke out in front of the band and spread rapidly.

Images of the aftermath showed how the fire had turned the inside of the club into a blackened wreck, with the charred metal frames of furniture scattered among ashes.

Police are investigating if fire escapes were present in the one-storey building and engineers are inspecting the structure amid fears it could collapse.

Interior minister Anupong Paochinda told reporters it appeared the Mountain B was operating "without permission" to run as an entertainment venue.

Sompong Chingduang, assistant commissioner of the Royal Thai Police, said the owner was under investigation for apparently changing the venue from a restaurant to a nightclub without permission.

Concerns have long been raised about Thailand's lax approach to health and safety regulations, particularly in its countless bars and nightclubs.

A massive inferno erupted at a New Year's Eve party at Bangkok's swanky Santika club in 2009, killing 67 people and injuring more than 200. The owner of Santika was jailed for three years over the blaze, which began when fireworks were set off as a rock band called Burn played on stage.

After ready

Kremlin says swap must be discussed without publicity

AFP | Washington

Russia said yesterday it was ready to discuss a prisoner swap with Washington at the presidential level, a day after the drug conviction of US basketball star Brittney Griner.

Despite tensions soaring between Russia and the US since the launch of Moscow's military intervention in Ukraine, the former Cold War rivals appeared to be edging closer to a new prisoner exchange.

The White House has urged Russia to accept its offer of a deal for the release of Griner and former US Marine Paul Whelan, who was sentenced to 16 years in prison on espionage charges.

Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov yesterday said Moscow was willing to discuss the matter.

"We are ready to discuss this subject, but only within the framework of the (communication) channel established by presidents Putin and Biden," Lavrov told a press conference on a visit to Cambodia.

"There is a special channel established by the presidents and despite certain public declarations, it is still functional," he added.

US Secretary of State Antony

Banksy painting sprayed in West Bank resurfaces in Tel Aviv

AP | Tel Aviv

A long-lost painting by the British graffiti artist Banksy has resurfaced in a swank art gallery in downtown Tel Aviv, an hour's drive and a world away from the concrete wall in the occupied West Bank where it was initially sprayed.

The relocation of the painting -- which depicts a sling-shot-toting rat and was likely intended to protest the Israel occupation -- raises ethical questions about the removal of artwork from occupied territory and the display of such



An Israeli art dealer reveals the painting by Banksy in Urban Gallery in Tel Aviv

politically-charged pieces in radically different settings from where they were created.

The painting initially appeared near Israel's separation barrier in the occupied West Bank city of Bethlehem and was one of several works created in secret around 2007. They employed Banksy's trademark absurdist and dystopian imagery to protest Israel's decades-long occupation of territories the Palestinians want for a future state.

Now it resides at the Urban Gallery in the heart of Tel Aviv's financial district, surrounded

by glass and steel skyscrapers.

"This is the story of David and Goliath," said Koby Abergel, an Israeli art dealer who purchased the painting, without elaborating on the analogy. He said the gallery was simply displaying the work, leaving its interpretation to others.

The Associated Press could not independently confirm the authenticity of the piece, but Abergel said the cracks and scrapes in the concrete serve as "a fingerprint" that proves it is the same piece that appears on the artist's website.

Hundreds of thousands

AP | Baghdad

Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis heeded the call of an influential cleric to gather in a show of strength for a mass prayer in the heart of Baghdad's government zone yesterday. The gathering took place amid an escalating political crisis that has put the country's capital on edge.

The powerful cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr, had called on his followers from across Iraq to come to pray inside Baghdad's Green Zone -- a heavily fortified area in the heart of the city that houses government buildings and foreign embassies. They arrived and stood outside in the scorching summer heat, with temperatures reaching 48 degrees Celsius (118 degrees Fahrenheit).

Meanwhile, in the holy southern city of Najaf, the head of Iraq's UN mission, Jeannine Hennis-Plasschaert, met with al-Sadr yesterday. She told reporters afterward that they discussed the importance of finding a solution to the political crisis.

Yesterday's mass prayer was the latest display of strength by the cleric, whose political power derives from his strong grassroots support base. The crowds



The graffiti artwork was spray-painted on a concrete block that was part of an abandoned Israeli army position in Bethlehem, next to a soaring concrete section of the separation barrier