

News in brief

Russia blocking of Black Sea would be 'unjustified': NATO ♦ Russian plans to block parts of the Black Sea would be "unjustified", NATO said, calling on Moscow "to ensure free access to Ukrainian ports in the Sea of Azov, and allow freedom of navigation". Russian state media have reported that Moscow intends to close parts of the Black Sea to foreign military and official ships for six months. The move has triggered concerns in the United States and the European Union.

Peru's Congress voted to ban former president Martin Vizcarra, implicated in a scandal over Covid-19 vaccinations, from holding public office for 10 years. The president has been accused of being part of a group of 470 people who were secretly vaccinated against the coronavirus before the official start of the country's immunization campaign. Vizcarra says he was taking part in a clinical trial.

Three astronauts return from International Space Station ♦ Three members of the International Space Station's crew returned safely to Earth on a Russian Soyuz craft, Russia's Roscosmos space agency reported. The Soyuz MS-17 spacecraft carrying NASA astronaut Kate Rubins, a microbiologist who in 2016 became the first person to sequence DNA in space, and Russian cosmonauts Sergey Ryzhikov and Sergey Kud-Sverchikov landed in Kazakhstan at 0455 GMT. The three had been at the space station since mid-October 2020.

A large blast rocked the northern Chilean mining city of Calama afternoon following an explosion in a storage warehouse belonging to Enaex, which produces explosives for the mining industry. The explosion shook buildings and set off car alarms up to 25 kilometers from the plant and generated a massive column of smoke that stretched high into the sky. As firefighters rushed to the scene, police cordoned off the area.

Eritrea told the United Nations Security Council that it has agreed to start withdrawing its troops from Ethiopia's Tigray region, acknowledging publicly for the first time the country's involvement in the conflict. The admission in a letter to the 15-member council - and posted online by Eritrea's Ministry of Information - comes a day after U.N. aid chief Mark Lowcock said the world body had not seen any proof that Eritrean soldiers have withdrawn.

COVID-19: Countries worst affected

Country	Total cases	Total deaths	Global tally
1 USA	32,328,917	580,193	141,092,398
2 India	14,766,378	177,009	
3 Brazil	13,834,342	369,024	Deaths
4 France	5,260,182	100,593	
5 Russia	4,693,469	105,193	3,018,308
6 UK	4,385,938	127,260	
7 Turkey	4,212,645	35,608	Recovered:
8 Italy	3,857,443	116,676	
9 Spain	3,407,283	76,981	New cases
10 Germany	3,129,338	80,479	
11 Poland	2,675,874	61,825	+584,078
12 Argentina	2,658,628	59,084	
13 Colombia	2,619,422	67,564	New deaths
14 Mexico	2,299,939	211,693	

Middle East

Country	Total cases	new cases	Total deaths	New Deaths	Total recovered	Active cases
Egypt	214,639		12,653		162,170	39,816
Saudi Arabia	404,054	+948	6,810	+9	387,795	9,449
UAE	495,224	+1,958	1,550	+3	478,063	15,611
Kuwait	254,472		1,436		237,667	15,369
Oman	176,668		1,821		156,845	18,002
Qatar	214,639		12,653		162,170	39,816

Figures as of closing

Myanmar's junta releases 23,000 prisoners in New Year's amnesty

AFP | Yangon

The junta is planning to release more than 23,000 prisoners nationwide, an official said Saturday, even as the military continues to detain and issue arrest warrants for anti-coup dissidents.

Myanmar typically grants an annual amnesty to thousands of prisoners to mark its traditional Buddhist New Year holiday -- which in previous years have been joyous affairs with city-wide water fights.

But this year, with the military back in power after ousting civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi, anti-coup activists have used the holiday as an opportunity to protest the growing death toll and mass arrests.

It remains unclear whether anti-junta protesters or journalists jailed covering the coup will be among those freed.

A prison official told AFP on condition of anonymity that jails across the country will start freeing more than 23,000 people on Saturday.

"We will release more than 800 prisoners from Insein prison" in commercial hub Yangon, he added, declining to elaborate.

In February, the junta released a similar number of prisoners, with some rights groups at the time fearing the move was to free up space for opponents of the military as well as cause chaos in communities.

On Wednesday a rebel group executed a man who had been freed in that amnesty, who it said had subsequently raped and killed a five-year-old girl.

Just before Armed Forces Day, the regime also freed around 900 jailed demonstra-



Buddhist monks visit Shwedagon pagoda following the Thingyan festival that marks the Burmese New Year in Yangon

YOU KNOW WHAT

Since the February 1 coup, more than 3,100 people -- the bulk of them anti-coup protesters and activists -- have been detained, according to local monitoring group Assistance for Political Prisoners

Association for Political Prisoners.

The junta has issued nightly arrest warrants on state-run media, targeting celebrities, influencers, journalists and prominent activists with large social media followings.

By Friday night, they totalled 380.

Some 80 doctors have also been named as wanted fugitives for attempting to "deteriorate peace and stability".

Myanmar's healthcare workers have been at the forefront of a nationwide civil disobedience movement, refusing to return to work under a military regime. Their absence has left many of the country's hospitals unstaffed during the pandemic.

The country has been under the junta's control for 11 weeks.

The military has consistently justified the putsch by alleging widespread fraud in November's elections, which Suu Kyi's party had won in a landslide.

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'Narcocat' intercepted with drug delivery for Panama prison

AFP | Panama City

Authorities in Panama on Friday intercepted an unlikely smuggler, a fluffy white cat, bearing an assortment of drugs in a pouch tied to its body as it tried to enter a prison.

The feline felon was stopped outside the Nueva Esperanza jail, which houses more than 1,700 prisoners, in the Caribbean province of Colon, north of the capital Panama City.

"The animal had a cloth tied around its neck" that contained wrapped packages of white powder, leaves and "vegetable matter", according to Andres Gutierrez, head of the Panama Penitentiary System.

They were likely cocaine, crack and marijuana, according to another official.

This is not the first such attempted critter crime.

Prisoners use food to lure animals to them, once the creatures had been loaded with drugs by people on the outside.



a white cat in a cage after being intercepted bearing an assortment of drugs in a pouch tied to its body

YOU KNOW WHAT

On previous occasions, authorities have intercepted attempted drug deliveries using homing pigeons and even drones

It posted photographs of the drugs, and of the cat caught in the act.

The animal will be taken to a pet adoption center, according to prosecutor Eduardo Rodriguez.

Panama has some 18,000 inmates in 23 prisons, most of them overcrowded.

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Queen alone a

William and Harry ta

There were just 30 mourners inside the chapel because of continuing coronavirus restrictions in Britain

Reuters | London

Queen Elizabeth bade farewell to Prince Philip at a funeral yesterday that celebrated his seven decades of service and gave grandsons William and Harry the chance to talk in public for the first time since claims of racism threw the family into crisis.

Elizabeth, dressed in black and in a white trimmed black face mask, stood alone, head bowed as her husband of 73 years was lowered into the Royal Vault of St George's Chapel in a service attended by senior royals including heir Prince Charles.

Prince Harry, who flew from the United States to attend the funeral, walked and talked with his brother William and wife Kate at the end of the service - the first time they have spoken in public since Harry and his wife Meghan gave an explosive interview to Oprah Winfrey last month.

That crisis came as Philip lay in hospital. Officially known as the Duke of Edinburgh, Philip died aged 99 on April 9.

"We have been inspired by his unwavering loyalty to our Queen, by his service to the Nation and the Commonwealth, by his courage, fortitude and faith," Dean of Windsor David Conner said.

CIA planned to as

The plot came to light as Raul Castro, the 89-year-old brother of Fidel Castro, prepares to leave Cuban politics by stepping down as head of the all-powerful Community Party of Cuba

AFP | Washington

The CIA made its first known attempt to assassinate a leader of the Cuban revolution in 1960, offering \$10,000 to a pilot flying Raul Castro from Prague to Havana to arrange an "accident," according to declassified documents published Friday.

Pilot Jose Raul Martinez, who had been recruited by the CIA, asked for -- and received -- assurance from the agency that it would provide university education to his two sons if he died during the operation, according to the documents published by the Washington-based National Security Archive research institute.

After Martinez left for Prague, CIA headquarters in the United