

What's happening in Southeast and East Asia

In
The
News.

6th of September 2021

Hong Kong activists jailed for illegal assembly in 2019 protests

Seven Hong Kong democracy activists were sentenced on Wednesday (Sept 1) to up to 16 months in jail for their role in an unauthorised assembly at the height of anti-government protests in 2019.

They had pleaded guilty to charges, including organising and inciting others to take part in the illegal assembly on Oct 20, 2019, when tens of thousands took to the streets and police fired tear gas and water cannon to disperse them.

The activists comprised Figo Chan, a former convener of the now-disbanded Civil Human Rights Front; Raphael Wong and Avery Ng of the League of Social Democrats political party; and former legislators Cyd Ho, Yeung Sum, Albert Ho and Leung Kwok Hung, who is known in Hong Kong as "Long Hair".



The sentences ranged from 11 months to 16 months. Apart from Wong, the other defendants were all serving jail time in relation to other illegal assembly cases. Judge Amanda Woodcock told the District Court that while the city's mini-Constitution "guarantees freedom of assembly, procession and demonstration", those rights are "not absolute".

"Restrictions were applied in the interests of public safety, public order and the protection of others' rights and freedoms," she said, referring to the Oct 20 rally. The demonstrations were triggered by Beijing's tightening control over the former British colony, which was promised broad freedoms when it was returned to Chinese rule in 1997.

Source: Reuters

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Philippines health workers protest neglect as COVID-19 strains hospitals

Scores of healthcare workers protested in the Philippine capital on 1 September, to demand an end to what they called government neglect and unpaid benefits, as pressure builds at hospitals fighting one of Asia's longest-running coronavirus epidemics.

Protesters wearing protective medical gear gathered at the Department of Health (DOH) and held placards demanding their risk allowances and hazard pay, and the resignation of Health Secretary Francisco Duque.

The Philippines passed the 2 million mark in coronavirus cases on Wednesday, a fifth of those recorded in the past month alone. Medical staff are overwhelmed and 103 have died during the pandemic, among some 33,500 coronavirus fatalities overall.



"It is sad that many of us have died, many of us became sick, and many have resigned or opted to retire early, yet we are still kneeling before the DOH to give us our benefits," Robert Mendoza, president of the Alliance of Health Workers, said from the back of a pickup truck. "The government promised it will give the benefits today but up to now, it has not. I pity us because we are the ones begging," said nurse Nico Oba.

Duterte has stood by health minister Duque during repeated calls for his resignation, the latest after state auditors flagged "deficiencies" in more than \$1 billion in COVID-19 spending. The Philippine Nurses Association held its own protest virtually to demand better working conditions and more staff at hospitals, nearly a third of which have reached "critical levels" of over 85% occupancy, according to government data.

Source: Reuters

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South Korean health workers drop strike plans after agreement

South Korean frontline health workers on Thursday, 2 September, dropped plans to strike after they reached an agreement with the government on their demand for increased staffing and better work conditions during last-ditch negotiations overnight.

The Korean Health and Medical Worker's Union had warned some of its 80,000 members, including nurses, medical engineers, and pharmacists who say they are exhausted from battling waves of Covid-19 outbreaks, would begin striking from Thursday if their demands were not met.

Upon the union's request, the government agreed to establish at least four public infectious disease hospitals by 2024, draft a detailed nurse deployment guidelines per severity of Covid-19 patients by October, and expand funding to subsidise those treating contagious diseases to go into effect in January 2022.

It has also agreed to establish a recommended nurse to patient ratio. The United States has a recommended ratio of 1:5 and Japan has 1:7 while South Korea has none. The union had argued its workers are often working double or triple shifts and need better pay and working hours. The government and the union have previously met for talks 12 times since May, including a 14-hour marathon session on Monday, but had not been able to find common ground.

South Korea has fully inoculated 31.7 percent of its 52 million people, and 57.4 percent with at least one dose. The government wants 70 percent of its citizens to have had at least one shot by September.

Source: Reuters



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Yoshihide Suga to step down as Japan's prime minister

Japan's prime minister, Yoshihide Suga, has said he will not run for re-election as party leader this month, signalling the end of his tenure.

Mr Suga had been appointed to the role just a year ago following the resignation of Shinzo Abe. The shock announcement comes as Mr Suga's approval ratings dropped to an all-time low.

Japan - which is still under a state of emergency - is now grappling with its worst ever Covid wave. The country, which has now seen more than 1.5 million virus cases, has also seen a slow vaccination roll out.

The decision to host the Olympics Games this year despite the worsening pandemic also proved to be hugely unpopular.

Today at the executive meeting, [Mr] Suga said he wants to focus his efforts on anti-coronavirus measures and will not run in the leadership election," said the secretary general of Mr Suga's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), according to an AFP report. "Honestly, I'm surprised. It's truly regrettable. He did his best but after careful consideration, he made this decision," he said.

Japanese shares rose sharply on the news, with the broad Topix stock index closing up by 1.6% after hitting its highest level in three decades. Tokyo's financial markets had made gains already this week on hopes for a stronger government ahead of the ruling party's leadership race and a general election later in the year.



Source: BBC News Asia

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Myanmar junta agrees to Asean call for ceasefire to distribute aid

Myanmar's military rulers have agreed to an Asean call for a ceasefire until the end of the year to ensure distribution of humanitarian aid, Japan's Kyodo news agency said, citing the envoy of the South-east Asian bloc to the crisis-torn nation.

Following a coup in February, Asean has been trying to end violence in Myanmar, where hundreds have been killed, and open a dialogue between the military rulers and their opponents.

The envoy, Mr Erywan Yusof, proposed the ceasefire in a video conference with Foreign Minister Wunna Maung Lwin, and the military had accepted it, he told the agency.



"This is not a political ceasefire. This is a ceasefire to ensure safety, (and) security of the humanitarian workers" in their effort to distribute aid safely, Mr Erywan said, according to Sunday's (Sept 5) report. "They didn't have any disagreement with what I said, with regards to the ceasefire," it quoted the envoy as saying. Mr Erywan had also passed his proposal indirectly to parties opposed to rule by the military, it added.

The junta could not be trusted to honour the deal, however, Myanmar pro-democracy activist Thinzar Shunlei Yi told Reuters, adding, "Ceasefires buy more time for the military to reload bullets." Mr Maw Htun Aung, a deputy minister in the National Unity Government formed of opponents of military rule, said Asean needed to tell the junta to stop "killing and terrorising" its own people.

Source: Reuters

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Thai protesters hit the streets as PM clings to power

Pro-democracy protesters vented their anger in Bangkok's heavy rain Saturday (Sept 4) after Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-cha survived a no-confidence vote in parliament.

More than 300 demonstrators marched in central Bangkok's main shopping mall district carrying red flags and wearing ponchos in the downpour.

"The government should be gone. If things were good why would we come out to protest?" a 28-year-old demonstrator told AFP.

Ahead of the rally, police used shipping containers to block major routes to the advertised protest site at the central Lumpini Park where protesters had planned to march.



The sluggish rollout of Thailand's vaccination programme and financial pain from restrictions has heaped political pressure on Prayut's government. The country is reeling from its worst economic performance since the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis as well as a deadly third wave of coronavirus infections.

Total case numbers have topped more than 1.2 million with over 12,000 deaths. Prayut defended his government's handling of the pandemic in parliament earlier this week. "Thailand's death rate from Covid-19 is comparatively very low, but we must make sure that there will be no more deaths," Prayut said, adding the decision not to access doses under the global Covax vaccine equity programme was in Thailand's best interest.

Source: AFP

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China's harsh education crackdown sends parents and businesses scrambling

In a country where parents prize a good education — and good grades play an outsized role in determining career opportunities — tens of millions of students across China drown in after-school tutoring courses every year.

But this summer will be the last one for educational institutions to legally sell such tutoring programs.

Since the central government officially released the so-called double reduction policy last month, local authorities in several provinces, such as Shanxi and Hunan, have ordered private businesses to suspend online and offline tutoring classes for children from kindergarten to 9th grade.

The policy states that one of its major goals is to ease the burden and anxiety for Chinese parents wanting to give their children a good education.

The guidelines focus on the nine years of compulsory education before high school — from elementary to middle school — and call for academic tutoring businesses to restructure as non-profits.

The policy also prohibits those businesses from offering classes on weekends, holidays, summer and winter breaks — effectively allowing tutoring only on weekdays with a limited number of hours.



Source: CNBC