

What's happening in Southeast and East Asia

In
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News.

22nd of September 2021

Burnt out: Philippine nurses battle Covid-19, resignations

Exhausted nurses in the Philippines are struggling to care for patients as colleagues contract Covid-19 or quit a profession that was dangerously understaffed even before the pandemic.

The country is enduring a record rise in infections, fuelled by the Delta variant, with the Health Department reporting a nursing shortfall of more than 100,000 - forcing those left to work long hours for little pay on often precarious short-term contracts.

"They are tired and burnt out," nursing director Lourdes Banaga, at a private hospital south of Manila said.



Official figures show 75,000 nurses are working in public and private Philippine hospitals but roughly 109,000 more are needed.

The pandemic has exacerbated a pre-existing lack of nurses, said Ms Maristela Abenojar, president of Filipino Nurses United - a situation she describes as "ironic" in one of the world's biggest exporters of healthcare workers. The "chronic understaffing" is down to inadequate salaries, she said.

In recent weeks, health workers have protested over unpaid benefits, including a coronavirus special risk allowance. Ms Abenojar said many were still waiting. President Rodrigo Duterte has asked for patience while the government tries to come up with the money. "We don't feel cared for," said Mr Melbert Reyes of the Philippine Nurses Association.

Source: AFP

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Politician aiming to become Japan's first female leader won't be a harbinger of gender equality

Shinzo Abe, Japan's longest-serving prime minister, often talked about creating a society in which women could "shine"

Now, a year after he resigned because of ill health, Abe is backing a woman, Sanae Takaichi, to lead the governing Liberal Democratic Party. If party members elect her this month, she will almost certainly become Japan's first female prime minister.

Takaichi, 60, is considered a long shot. If she beats the odds, it will be a significant milestone for Japan, where women make up less than 15 per cent of parliament and only two of the current Cabinet's 21 ministers are female.

But Takaichi, a hard-line conservative, is a divisive figure among Japanese who advocate for women's empowerment. She rarely talks about gender equality, and she supports some policies, such as a law requiring married couples to share a surname, that feminists say diminish women's rights.

"For her to be up there on a pedestal as a shining example of a different, improved, changed society for Japanese women would be the worst possible thing that could happen," said Noriko Hama, an economics professor at Doshisha University Business School in Kyoto.

The Liberal Democrats will hold their leadership vote on Sept 29. Yoshihide Suga, the unpopular current prime minister and party leader, said this month that he would step aside.



Source: New York Times

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Iron curtain falls on Hong Kong cinema as censors demand cuts

Once renowned for world-class cinema, Hong Kong's film industry was already struggling before the latest hurdle – Chinese mainland-style censorship as authorities take their purge of dissent into the cultural sphere.

Filmmaker Mok Kwan-ling's heart sank when the e-mail from the government censors dropped.

In June, authorities announced all films would now be scrutinised for "national security" breaches. Mok's was the first known to have fallen foul of these rules.

For months, she had been putting together her debut, a 27-minute drama inspired by the many young couples she encountered during huge democracy protests two years ago.

It tells the story of a young woman meeting her boyfriend's parents after he is arrested for taking part in the protests. The boyfriend's mother is opposed to the movement, his father sympathetic. The Cantonese title "Zap Uk" (literally "clean up the house") is a reference to how friends and family would often remove any incriminating items once a loved one was arrested.

But Mok said Hong Kong's film censors were not happy with what was submitted and ordered her to make 14 cuts. Among the changes they demanded was removing a line from the father saying their son was a first aid volunteer who was "only out there to save the people" as well as deleting a scene where the same character, a truck driver, charges protesters a discounted fare. The censors also demanded the film be renamed and carry a warning that it showed criminal offences.



Source: AFP

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Myanmar shutdown marks grim year for web freedom

Internet users in a record number of countries have faced arrest and physical attacks for their posts over the past year, painting a grim picture of digital freedoms in 2021.

The annual "Freedom on the Net" report said internet shutdowns in Myanmar and Belarus had proved particular low points as online rights declined globally for the 11th year in a row.

Compiled by US think-tank Freedom House, the survey gives countries a score out of 100 for the level of internet freedom enjoyed by citizens, including the extent to which they face restrictions on the content they can access.



Other factors include whether pro-government trolls seek to manipulate online debates. "This year, users faced physical attacks in retribution for their online activities in 41 countries," the report said, a "record high" since the tracking started 11 years ago.

Examples included a Bangladeshi student hospitalised after a beating for alleged "anti-government activities" on social media, and a Mexican journalist assassinated after posting a Facebook video accusing a gang of murder. The report also found that people had been arrested or convicted for their online activities in 56 out of the 70 countries covered by the report - a record 80 per cent.

Myanmar was singled out for heavy criticism in the report after a military junta seized power in February and shut down the internet, blocked social media and forced tech companies to hand over personal data.

Source: AFP

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Malaysian transgender entrepreneur arrested in Thailand

A prominent Malaysian transgender entrepreneur wanted in her homeland for insulting Islam by cross-dressing has been arrested in Thailand, the police said, with the authorities seeking her extradition.

The case of Nur Sajat, who runs a cosmetics business, has added to concerns about the worsening climate for the LGBT community in Muslim-majority Malaysia.

Officials increasingly speak out against homosexuality, and recently announced they are seeking to toughen laws against gay people.

Sajat, 36, was charged in January this year in an Islamic court outside Kuala Lumpur for dressing as a woman at a religious event in 2018 in violation of syariah laws.

The court issued an arrest warrant in February after she failed to turn up for a hearing, and she has been on the run since. She faces up to three years in jail if convicted. Multi-ethnic Malaysia operates a dual-track legal system, with syariah courts handling some cases for Muslim citizens.

The Malaysian police said Sajat was arrested on Sept 8 in Thailand by immigration authorities for having an invalid passport and charged with immigration offences. Sajat is wanted in Malaysia for offences including obstructing a civil servant, they said.

"Efforts are being made to bring the suspect back," added police official Abdul Jalil Hassan, giving Sajat's full name as Muhammad Sajjad Kamaruz Zaman.



Source: AFP

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Bat viruses found in Laos 'closest known ancestors' to pandemic strain

Researchers say three coronaviruses identified in horseshoe bats in the north of the country share key similarity with Sars-CoV-2. Critical area is the genetic structure of the receptor binding domain, which enables the virus to latch onto and infect cells

A team of Laotian and French researchers have discovered a significant clue as to how the virus responsible for Covid-19 evolved, with their findings showing bat viruses in Laos share a key similarity with the pandemic strain. The scientists from Institut Pasteur and the National University of Laos collected samples in the Southeast Asian nation over six months from July last year.

They say three coronaviruses found in horseshoe bats living in limestone caves in the north of the country are the most similar identified so far to Sars-CoV-2 in a critical part of its genome – the region which enables it to latch onto and infect cells.

Known as the receptor binding domain, its genetic structure has been at the centre of questions within the scientific community because it differs from the bat virus considered to be the closest known ancestor of Sars-CoV-2. The findings come amid growing attention on the hunt for the origin of Covid-19. Intense scientific and political debate has focused on whether the virus – thought to originate in a bat – spilled into humans naturally or was the result of a research or laboratory-related incident.

While the latest study does not resolve that question, the findings provide significant pushback against a theory that Sars-CoV-2 could have been genetically engineered, outside researchers say.

Source: South China Morning Post



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Xianzi: The #MeToo icon China is trying to silence

Xianzi journey on the landmark sexual harassment case against China's celebrity has hit a dead end. The court threw out her case saying there was insufficient evidence.

Xianzi sounds exhausted. "Sorry. I've been crying the last half hour," she tells the BBC over the phone from Beijing. It is the day after a court ruled on the Chinese activist's landmark sexual harassment case against one of the country's biggest celebrities, which has made her the face of China's fledgling #MeToo movement.

But three years on, her journey has hit a dead end. The court threw out her case saying there was insufficient evidence.

In 2018 as #MeToo caught on in China, Xianzi - her real name is Zhou Xiaoxuan. In a 3,000-word essay that later went viral, she accused Zhu Jun - a host with state broadcaster CCTV - of sexually harassing her in 2014 when she visited his dressing room hoping to do an interview with him.

At the time she was a 21-year-old intern, while Mr Zhu was a household name in China, a familiar face to tens of millions for presenting the annual Spring Festival Gala television event. A subsequent essay laid out more details, accusing him of groping her repeatedly for about 50 minutes despite her attempts to block him, and forcibly kissing her.

The day after her encounter, Xianzi reported the incident to the police. But, according to her, she was told to keep it to herself as Mr Zhu was a national example of "positive energy" - a state campaign aimed at promoting good behaviour - and therefore someone whose reputation could not be sullied. So she kept quiet - until the #MeToo movement happened.

Source: BBC News Asia



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North Korea says hope is alive for peace summit with South Korea

North Korea is willing to consider another summit with South Korea if mutual respect between the neighbors can be assured, state news agency KCNA said on Saturday, citing Kim Yo Jong, the sister of the North's leader Kim Jong Un.

South Korea welcomed the prospect on Sunday, with the Unification Ministry saying it expected to swiftly engage in talks with Pyongyang, while urging the need to restore a hotline link between the two.

Kim's comment came after the North urged the United States and South Korea last week to abandon what it called their hostile policy and double standards towards it, if formal talks are to be held on ending the 1950-53 Korean War.

North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons has complicated the question of a formal end to the war, which halted with an armistice, rather than a peace treaty, leaving US-led UN forces technically still at war with the North. "I think that only when impartiality and the attitude of respecting each other are maintained, can there be smooth understanding between the north and the south," said Kim Yo Jong, who is a powerful confidante of her brother.

Constructive discussions offer a chance for solutions on issues such as "the re-establishment of the north-south joint liaison office and the north-south summit, to say nothing of the timely declaration of the significant termination of the war", Kim said. Speaking on Tuesday to the UN General Assembly, South Korean President Moon Jae-in had repeated a call for a formal end to the war, but later said time was running out for such progress before his term ends in May.



Source: CNN News Asia

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Singapore arrests 18 suspects for importing staff on fake work permits

The case came to light after a foreign national in July attempted to acquire Singapore work pass illegally, prompting a months-long investigation

Singapore's Manpower Ministry on Tuesday said 18 people had been arrested over the past week on suspicion "of bringing foreigners" to the city state "on work passes obtained through false declarations".

The ministry last week mounted a 12-hour operation at 22 locations across the country after uncovering a "potential syndicate suspected of setting up several shell companies to apply for work passes".

"Such syndicates typically recruit Singapore citizens and Singapore permanent residents to receive CPF contributions as 'phantom local workers' in order to illegally inflate the companies' quota to hire foreigners," the ministry said in a statement, referring to the city state's retirement fund contributions. "Based on the inflated quota, the companies would apply for work passes for the foreigners through false declarations and collect kickbacks from them," it said.

The case came to light after a foreign national in July attempted to acquire Singapore work pass illegally, prompting a months-long investigation. The arrests came after last week saw a rare flare-up in parliament, which is dominated by the long-ruling People's Action Party (PAP), over concerns that foreign workers were taking jobs from locals. The detainees could be jailed for up to two years if found guilty.



Source: CNN News Asia

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Myanmar air strikes reported in battle, Internet cut in more areas

Myanmar's military launched air strikes at the weekend after clashes with fighters opposed to the junta in the Sagaing region, according to media and a militia member, as phone lines and the Internet were also severed in some districts

The South-east Asian country has been in crisis since the army seized power on Feb 1, ending a decade of tentative steps towards democracy and triggering outrage at home and abroad and the setting up of People's Defence Forces (PDFs) to take on the military.

The DVB news portal reported the air strikes occurred as the army staged an offensive in the Pinlebu area of Sagaing in northwest Myanmar, citing residents who heard aircraft and explosions on Saturday (Sept 25) night before phone lines and the Internet went down.



A member of the Pinlebu PDF, speaking from outside the area, also confirmed by telephone that air strikes had taken place, but said there had been no casualties among his group. "We cannot contact them due to the Internet and phone lines blackout," the activist, who declined to be identified, said of his opposition colleagues.

The National Unity Government (NUG), a shadow administration set up by ousted lawmakers and others opposed to the junta, said an arms cache including a rocket propelled grenade, small arms and shells had been seized in the fighting. It said more than 25 government soldiers had been killed. There has been an upsurge in bloodshed in areas like Sagaing after the underground NUG declared an uprising on Sept 7 and called on PDFs to target the junta and its assets.

Source: Reuters

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Logistics, staff shortage hurt Indonesia's Covid-19 vaccination progress

Only 17.9 per cent of Indonesia's 270 million people are fully vaccinated, behind almost every major economy in the region

A shortage of healthcare workers and logistical flaws are hampering Indonesia's efforts to inoculate its people against Covid-19, leaving the world's largest archipelago trailing its neighbours despite being among the first in South-east Asia to start the programme.

About 32 per cent have received their first dose, placing the nation among the bottom four on the list. "Supply at the national level is no longer an issue, getting shots into the arms of the people is," said Griffith University epidemiologist Dicky Budiman, who is assisting the government in improving vaccination coverage.

The slow inoculation progress risks Indonesia's efforts to keep the pandemic under control and sustain the fragile recovery of its US\$1.1 trillion economy. A new outbreak caused by the more contagious delta variant forced the government to reimpose its strictest mobility curbs at the start of the third quarter, with the restrictions helping bring down its weekly death count to the lowest since mid-April.

The nation is slowly building up its Covid-19 vaccine stocks after a shaky start earlier this year, and has so far received 273.6 million doses, some in the form of bulks that need further processing, the information ministry said in a statement on Friday (Sept 24). The government targets inoculating 208 million people across the country.



Source: Bloomberg

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Beijing expands footprint in Hong Kong with new departments

China's Cabinet-level office overseeing Hong Kong has expanded by creating two departments to oversee propaganda and security affairs, local media reported, signalling Beijing's growing footprint in the financial hub.

The Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office's (HKMAO) new propaganda department will focus on communicating news, while managing journalists from the two special administrative regions based in the mainland, according to the agency's website.

The second department will coordinate matters related to national security. The changes were added to an organisation summary on the Beijing-based office's website on Thursday (Sept 23), according to local news outlets South China Morning Post and Sing Tao.

Mr Zeng Jian, 52, and Mr Wang Zhenmin, 55, will head the propaganda and security departments respectively, according to the publications, citing individuals familiar with the matter. Both men have significant experience at the HKMAO and the Liaison Office, the central government's top body located in the former British colony, the SCMP reported.

Beijing's bolstering of the office from seven departments to nine comes as it steps up direct control of Hong Kong, following the often-violent 2019 anti-government protests. Since then, China has imposed a sweeping national security law on the city and implemented an electoral overall to ensure "patriots only" rule, which together have wiped opposition from the legislature and squeezed space for public dissent.



Source: Bloomberg