

What's happening in Southeast and East Asia

In
The
News.

24th of May 2021

More than 125,000 Myanmar teachers suspended for opposing coup

More than 125,000 school teachers in Myanmar have been suspended by the military authorities for joining a civil disobedience movement to oppose the military coup in February, an official of the Myanmar Teachers' Federation said.

The suspensions have come days before the start of a new school year, which some teachers and parents are boycotting as part of the campaign that has paralysed the country since the coup cut short a decade of democratic reforms.

A total of 125,900 school teachers had been suspended as of 5th of May 2021, said the official of the teachers' federation, who declined to give his name for fear of reprisals. He is already on the junta's wanted list on charges of inciting disaffection.

Myanmar had 430,000 school teachers according to the most recent data, from two years ago.

"These are just statements to threaten people to come back to work. If they actually fire this many people, the whole system will stop," said the official, who is also a teacher. He said he had been told that the charges he faces would be dropped if he returns. The state-run Global New Light of Myanmar newspaper has called on teachers and students to return to schools to get the education system started again.

The disruption at schools echoes that in the health sector and across government and private business since the Southeast Asian country was plunged into chaos by the coup and the arrest of elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Around 19,500 university staff have also been suspended, according to the teachers' group.

Source: Reuters



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Kuala Lumpur metro train crash injures more than 200 passengers

More than 200 people have been injured in a train crash in the Malaysian capital Kuala Lumpur. A metro train carrying 213 passengers collided with an empty one in a tunnel near the Petronas Towers, at about 12:45 GMT, police said.

The empty train had just been repaired, and was going in the opposite direction on the same track as the full one. District police chief Mohamad Zainal Abdullah told reporters there was no sign of foul play.

"We are still investigating the incident... but we suspect that perhaps there was a miscommunication from the trains' operation control centre," he said. Of the 213 injured, 47 people are in a serious condition while the other 166 have sustained minor injuries, he added.

Images and footage posted on social media in the hours after the incident showed bleeding passengers lying on the floor of the train carriage, which was covered in broken glass.

In a statement posted on Facebook, Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin said the crash, which happened near the city's busy KLCC station, was "serious". He added that he had asked the train operator Prasarana Malaysia Berhad and the country's transport minister "to conduct an in-depth probe to find out the cause of the accident".

Transport Minister Wee Ka Siong said in a separate statement that the crash was the metro system's first major accident in the 23 years it had been operating. He also pledged to conduct a full investigation.



Source: BBC News Asia

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Vietnam's first openly gay candidate sets sights on National Assembly seat in Sunday's vote

Luong The Huy, 32, wants to boost the voices of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, who have long felt discrimination in Vietnam. But getting his name on the ballot in a communist, one-party state where fewer than one in 10 candidates are independents was no simple task

As an LGBT activist, legal whizz-kid and Vietnam's first openly gay candidate running for a seat in its rubber-stamp parliament, Luong The Huy is determined to lead long-lasting change for the country's marginalised communities.

Huy, 32, running as an independent candidate for Vietnam's National Assembly in elections to be held across the country on Sunday and wants to boost the voices of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, who have long felt discrimination.

But getting his name on the ballot in the communist, one-party state was no simple task.

At the last elections five years ago, more than 100 independent candidates – including dissidents, a taxi driver and a pop star – tried to run, but just a handful made it through the gruelling selection process. Now that he has made it this far, he is clear about what he wants to achieve. “I want people's voices to be heard,” Huy said from his Hanoi office, sitting beside a framed poster bearing the slogan “Human rights are for everyone”.

Huy, who is currently director of Vietnamese NGO iSEE, which aims to empower minority groups to protect and promote their rights, has been campaigning for a decade to improve the lives of the Vietnamese LGBT community.

Source: Agence France-Presse



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Singapore warns US embassy over webinar with LGBT group

The invitation-only event was held on Monday and co-hosted by the US embassy and local LGBT support group Oogachaga. Singapore's foreign ministry said it reminded the embassy that 'foreign missions here are not to interfere in our domestic social and political matters'

Socially-conservative Singapore on Wednesday said it "noted with regret" that the US embassy in the city state had co-hosted a webinar with a local LGBT support group earlier this week.

Multi-ethnic Singapore has strict laws regulating public assembly. Foreigners are prohibited from taking part in events dealing with a political cause.

"Ministry of foreign affairs has reminded the US Embassy that foreign missions here are not to interfere in our domestic social and political matters, including issues such as how sexual orientation should be dealt with in public policy," it said in a statement.

"These are choices for only Singaporeans to debate and decide." The May 17 webinar marked the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia and focused on the economic advantages of LGBTQI+ equality and inclusion around the world, the US embassy in Singapore said. LGBTQI refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning and/or queer and intersex.

"The US Embassy regularly works with civil society partners on a wide range of issues to build awareness and advance the human rights of all persons," it added. The event was co-hosted with support group Oogachaga. Under a rare colonial-era law, Section 377A of the penal code, sex between men is punishable by up to two years in jail, though prosecutions are rare. Previous attempts to overturn the legislation have failed.

Source: South China Morning Post



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Sweat-sniffer dogs make Thai debut as coronavirus detectors

Thailand deployed dogs trained to detect coronavirus infections by sniffing samples of human sweat, as the country deals with a spike in infections, including many without symptoms of the virus.

Three of six trained Labradors made their debut at Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University after trials that the project leader said had shown a success rate of about 95 per cent, with about 2,000 samples sniffed this month.

"The canines are very fast at screening," said co-researcher Thitiwat Sirprasart. "At this pace, we are able to isolate those whom we suspect are infected from those who are virus-free."

The dogs are not required to smell the humans directly. Sweat samples are collected from humans and stored in small metal containers for the dogs to inspect one-by-one. When a suspected infection is found, the dog halts and directs its nose at the sample.

"The distinctive scent is what would appear after there is an infection. Different kinds of viruses will produce different kinds of scent," said co-researcher Pattama Torvorapanit. The project's directors hope the dogs will be used at airports or boat piers and say they are more effective than temperature checks.

Thailand is fighting its most severe outbreak yet, with cases quadrupling to 123,066 and deaths increasing seven-fold since the start of April to 735.

Source: Reuters



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In South Korea, women in military becomes gender battleground

A 2022 presidential hopeful suggested mandatory military service for women would promote gender equality amid low birth rates. But the gender equality minister said the environment for serving in the military needs to be improved as a petition demanding female conscription gains steam

A heated debate in South Korea about mandatory military service for women is inflaming divisions between the sexes rather than narrowing social gaps, the country's gender equality minister said.

The issue has been the subject of wide discussion since April, when ruling party lawmaker and 2022 presidential hopeful Park Yong-jin reacted to local election defeats by suggesting mandatory military service for women would promote gender equality.

Chung Young-ai, who leads the Gender Equality and Family Ministry, on Monday said the direction of the argument was "problematic".

"The debate on women serving in the military didn't come from trying to achieve gender equality, but from voices who are asking women to experience the same disadvantages that men did," she said. Park's proposal touched on a divisive issue that in some way affects almost every family in South Korea, which is technically still at war with the North and shares one of the world's most militarised borders.

An online petition to the office of President Moon Jae-in demanding female conscription received almost 300,000 signatures as of Tuesday, surpassing a threshold that requires a response. Moon's progressive government has seen support among women erode ahead of a presidential election just 10 months away and is trying to win back the crucial voting block to keep the top office when Moon's single, five-year terms ends.

Source: Bloomberg



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Japan cuts size of foreign Olympics delegations as opposition to Games grows

Some 69,000 people, from athletes to diplomats, are expected to arrive at a time several Japanese prefectures are in a state of emergency. While the figure is far below the original 200,000, one expert says it's still 'too high', with China alone sending 500 media workers

Organisers of the Tokyo Olympic Games say they have lowered the number of foreigners coming to Japan as athletes, support staff or media workers to about 69,000, although a leading infections expert is calling for that figure to be cut even further.

Before the coronavirus pandemic, the government, the organising committee and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) were anticipating around 200,000 foreign athletes, team officials, IOC members, media staff, and representatives of sponsors to travel to Tokyo for the largest sporting event in Japan's history.

With the virus still spreading in much of Japan, a state of emergency imposed on Tokyo and a number of other prefectures, and Covid-19 variants emerging, that figure has been cut by more than half. Officials now expect 15,000 athletes to arrive in Japan, along with 10,000 coaches and team officials, and a further 43,000 accredited personnel, such as IOC staff and media. An estimated 25,000 people are due to attend the Paralympics.

Chinese government officials told the IOC on Tuesday that they would be sending more than 500 reporters to cover the Games. "They need to bring the numbers down lower because I think that is still too many," said Yoko Tsukamoto, a professor of infection control at the Health Sciences University of Hokkaido.



Source: South China Morning Post