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-Dai Kurokawa/EPA

A couple takes a stroll in the bamboo grove in Arashiyama, Kyoto, Japan, yesterday (27), after the country lifted the nationwide state of emergency introduced because of the coronavirus pandemic on Monday (25), with government officials warning caution was still necessary to prevent another wave. Compared with hard-hit areas in Europe, the United States, Russia and Brazil, Japan has been spared the worst of the pandemic, with 16,581 infections and 830 deaths. But on April 7, with cases

beginning to spike and fears for the country's health system, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe declared a state of emergency for Tokyo and six other regions - later expanding it to cover the entire nation. Businesses and schools were urged to shut and people were asked to remain home, but Japan's lockdown was far softer than in other parts of the world and there was no punishment for those flouting the rules. Citizens largely heeded the orders, however, with most of Tokyo's famously packed streets fall-

ing quiet. The number of new infections has fallen from a peak of around 700 per day to just a few dozen nationally. There does not appear to be a single clear reason why the pandemic has not hit Japan as hard as other comparable countries. High levels of hygiene and general health, the habit of removing shoes indoors, widespread mask usage, and bowing as a greeting rather than shaking hands or kissing, all have been advanced as possible reasons, but analysts agree there has been no silver bullet

US revokes Hong Kong special status as furore grows on China law

WASHINGTON — Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced yesterday (27) that he told Congress the State Department no longer considered Hong Kong to have significant autonomy under Chinese rule, a move that indicated that the Trump administration was likely to end some or all of the US government's special trade and economic relations with the territory in southern China.

Pompeo's announcement came the day before Beijing was expected to pass a proposed national security law that would allow Chinese security agencies to crack down on civil

liberties in Hong Kong. Pompeo has said that would be a "death knell" for Hong Kong, which has had liberties under a semiautonomous system of governance that does not exist in mainland China, including freedoms of speech, the press and assembly, as well as an independent judiciary.

Any move by the Trump administration to curtail trade and economic relations with Hong Kong would deal a major blow to the territory, which has been a global financial and commercial hub since late last century. And it would be a harsh punishment for China, which relies on the thriving

city of ports and skyscrapers on the edge of the South China Sea as a nexus for transactions with other countries. Many Chinese and foreign companies use Hong Kong as an international or regional base.

The Trump administration is considering imposing the same tariffs on exports from Hong Kong that it puts on goods from mainland China, according to officials with knowledge of the discussions. That could happen soon after the Chinese government approves the national security law today (28). "I certified to Congress today that Hong Kong does not con-

tinue to warrant treatment under United States laws in the same manner as US laws were applied to Hong Kong before July 1997," Pompeo said yesterday. "No reasonable person can assert today that Hong Kong maintains a high degree of autonomy from China, given facts on the ground."

The certification by the State Department is a recommendation on policy direction and does not itself catalyze any actions immediately. US. Officials, including President Donald Trump, will now weigh what steps to take.

-NYT

'I can't breathe'

4 Minneapolis officers fired after black man dies in custody

MINNEAPOLIS -The FBI and Minnesota law enforcement authorities are investigating the arrest of a black man who died after being handcuffed and pinned to the ground by an officer's knee, in an episode that was recorded on video by a bystander and sparked large protests in Minneapolis on Tuesday (26).

After the graphic video circulated widely on social media, the mayor denounced the actions of the four officers who were involved and said Tuesday afternoon that they had been fired. He identified the victim as George Floyd.

Floyd, 46, a resident of St. Louis Park, Minnesota, a Minneapolis suburb, was pronounced dead at 9:25 p.m. Monday (25) at Hennepin County Medical Centre, according to the medical examiner. Floyd's family members told CNN

the officers should be charged with murder.

"They treated him worse than they treat animals," said Philonise Floyd, Floyd's brother. "They took a life — they deserve life."

The arrest took place Monday evening, the Minneapolis Police Department said in a statement, after officers responded to a call about a man suspected of forgery. The police said the man, was found sitting on top of a blue car and "appeared to be under the influence."

On Tuesday morning, without referring to the video recorded by a bystander, the police updated a statement, titled "Man Dies After Medical Incident During Police Interaction," that said that additional information had "been made available" and that the FBI was joining the investigation.

-NYT

'Overtaken by aliens'

India faces another plague as locusts swarm

NEW DELHI — Magan Doodi, a groundskeeper at a golf course in Jaipur, was making his rounds earlier this week when he saw the sky suddenly turn a weird pink.

It wasn't some quirk of the weather. It was locusts — millions of them, "like a spreading bed sheet," he said.

As if India needed more challenges, with coronavirus infections steadily increasing, a heat wave hitting the capital, and 100 million people out of work, the country now has to fight off a new problem: a locust invasion.

Scientists say it's the worst attack in 25 years and these locusts are different.

"This time the attack is by very young locusts who fly for longer distances, at faster speeds, unlike adults in the past who were sluggish and not so fast," said

K.L. Gurjar, the deputy director of India's Locust Warning Organization.

The locusts poured in from the east, from Iran and Pakistan, blanketing half a dozen states in western and central India. Because most of the crops were recently harvested, the hungry swarms have buzzed into urban areas, eager to devour bushes and trees, carpeting whatever surface they land on.

Scientists say this outbreak, though separate from recent outbreaks in East Africa, is driven by the same factors: unusually warm weather and more rain. They blame climate change.

Indian scientists said that in a single day, a modest locust swarm can travel 200 kilometers, or 125 miles, and eat as much food as about 35,000 people.

-NYT

Trump offers to mediate in India-China frontier showdown

WASHINGTON - US President Donald Trump offered yesterday (27) to mediate in what he called a "raging" border showdown between India and China in the Himalayas.

Trump's offer came after Indian defence sources said hundreds of Chinese troops had moved into a disputed zone along their 3,500 kilometre-long (2,200 mile) frontier.

Two weeks ago several Indian and Chinese troops were hurt during fistfights and stone-throwing in another sector. There has been no violence reported since, however.

While blaming each other for the flare-up, the world's two most populous countries have stressed the need to negotiate a settlement to the latest dispute along their tortuous border.

Trump, who has sought closer ties with India in recent years while also being involved in a tense trade showdown with China, made his offer in a Twitter statement.

"We have informed both India and China that the United States is ready, willing and able to mediate or arbitrate their now raging border dispute. Thank you!" he said.

Last year Trump offered to mediate between India and Pakistan over their Kashmir dispute, but it was tersely rejected by India.

Alice Wells, the top US State Department official for South Asia, said last week that China was seeking to upset the regional balance and had to be "resisted."

India and China fought a war over India's north-eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh in 1962. China still claims some 90,000 square kilometres (35,000 square miles) of territory under New Delhi's control.

While no shot has been fired across their border for more than four decades, there have been numerous face-offs.

-AFP

Trending News

Canada: In a legal setback to Huawei tech executive Meng Wanzhou, a judge rules proceedings to extradite her to the US will continue.

France/Belgium: Authorities in both countries say more than two dozen people have been arrested in connection with the deaths of 39 Vietnamese migrants whose bodies were found in a refrigerated truck in Britain in October.

Burkina Faso: Human Rights Watch says jihadist attacks have caused 2,500 schools to close since 2017, depriving 350,000 children of a proper education.

WHO: The world health body launches a new foundation for private donations, as US President Donald Trump threatens to pull the plug over its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

EU: The bloc unveils a 750-billion-euro recovery plan to get the continent back on its feet after the devastation wreaked by the coronavirus pandemic.

- France, Italy and Belgium act to halt the use of hydroxychloroquine to treat patients suffering from COVID-19, amid questions about

the safety of the generic anti-malaria drug.

Space travel: NASA says SpaceX's historic first crewed launch is set to proceed as scheduled, but some uncertainty remain over weather conditions.

Rwanda: A French court turns down genocide suspect Felicien Kabuga's request to be released on bail pending a decision on where he will be tried after a quarter century on the run.

UK: Prime Minister Boris Johnson says it is time to "move on" from the

scandal over top aide Dominic Cummings' cross-country travels during the coronavirus lockdown, as he faces a rare grilling from lawmakers.

Hungary: Rights groups warn government proposals to repeal controversial anti-coronavirus provisions are an "optical illusion" that do not "dispel fears" about a power grab by Prime Minister Viktor Orban.

Iran: Following the murder of a 14-year-old girl, which sparked protests across the country, President Hassan Rowhani calls for stricter laws regarding honour killings.

Quote for Today

Unless we remember we cannot understand.

-E. M. Forster

Word for Today

Scilicet [siluhset] —adverb — to wit; namely

Today in History

1959 - Two monkeys become the first living creatures to survive a space flight

Today is...

Amnesty International Day

A day that is all about promoting human rights and raising awareness of their abuses and how our choices affect them every day.

HOT TOPICS

By Mark Landler and Stephen Castle

Outcry over Cummings turns public against Johnson for 1st time

LONDON — For more than two months, Prime Minister Boris Johnson has flourished in his response to the coronavirus — abandoning widespread testing, dragging his feet on imposing a lockdown, leaving nursing homes unprotected and muddling his message about how to reopen the British economy.

But it took a rogue 260-mile car trip by Johnson's closest adviser to turn the tide of public opinion against him.

The outcry over Johnson's chief adviser, Dominic Cummings, showed no signs of abating, as a junior minister in Johnson's government resigned in protest and several additional lawmakers from his Conservative Party called on the prime minister to dismiss Cummings, taking the total number of those who have gone public against him to more than 35.

Two new polls showed a sharp erosion of public support for Johnson and a wall of opposition for his aide.

The image of a powerful government official flouting the lockdown rules that Downing Street enforces on everyone else has struck a nerve in a way that Britain's haphazard response to the virus has not. Unlike the mysteries of epidemiology or the technical details of testing, Cummings' decision to decamp for his parents' house in Durham, in the north of England, when others were confined in their homes, is easy to understand.

"I have constituents who didn't get to say goodbye to loved ones; families who could not mourn together; people who didn't visit sick relatives because they followed the guidance of the government," observed Douglas Ross, undersecretary of state for Scotland, in his resignation statement.

"I cannot in good faith tell them they were all wrong and one senior adviser to the government was right," he said.

Johnson showed no signs of abandoning Cummings, offering such an unequivocal defence, analysts said, that it likely forecloses the possibility of opening an inquiry into his conduct — one way the prime minister could have appeased critics.

He risked his political capital to send his aide out to the garden at No. 10 Downing St. on Monday (25) to mount an unrepentant defence of his actions. Cummings said with his wife showing symptoms of the virus and him fearing he would soon contract it, he wanted to line up care for his 4-year-old child with relatives in Durham. On Tuesday (26) the British news media remorselessly dissected Cummings' account. They zeroed in on his claim that after he arrived in Durham and was bedridden for several days there, he drove to a scenic town more than 20 miles away to test his eyesight, which he said had been impaired by his illness, before embarking on the long journey back to London. The visit coincided with the birthday of Cummings' wife.

Kay Burley, an anchor at Sky News, pressed an ally of Cummings', Michael Gove, on whether people with damaged eyesight should "get in a car and drive half an hour with your 4-year-old strapped in the back." Gove, a senior Cabinet minister, allowed that Cummings could have skipped the excursion to the town, Barnard Castle, and driven straight to London.

That ordinary Britons were consumed by the picaresque details of an unelected political strategist's personal travels, on a day when new government statistics suggested that the death toll from the coronavirus was closing in on 50,000, showed why the Cummings affair poses such a threat to Johnson. It goes beyond the normal din of politics to become a topic for dinner table conversation.

In British parlance, it is a story with "cut through."

"Sixty-five million of us have been locked up for weeks," said Jonathan Powell, a former chief of staff to Prime Minister Tony Blair, "and this guy has the cheek to break the rules he created and then tell us he acted reasonably. That has a completely electric effect."

Cummings' effort to explain himself rallied his supporters, who include most prominent Cabinet ministers, but failed to turn the tide either among other lawmakers or, apparently, the general public.

A poll by market research firm YouGov, taken after Monday's news conference, found that 71% of respondents believed Cummings violated government rules in travelling to Durham, and 59% believed he should resign.

Johnson's numbers have taken a hit as well. Another survey, by polling firm SavantaComRes, found that his approval rating plunged 20 percentage points in the past four days and now stands in negative territory for the first time since his landslide election victory in December.

-New York Times



-ISAAC LAWRENCE / AFP

Riot police detain a group of people (R) during a protest in the Causeway Bay district of Hong Kong yesterday (27), as the city's legislature debates over a law that bans insulting China's national anthem. Hong Kong police placed a dragnet around the financial hub's legislature yesterday and fired pepper-ball rounds in the commercial district as they tried to stamp out protests against a bill banning insults to China's national anthem

By Helen Davidson, and Verna Yu

Hong Kong crisis

Riot police flood city as China protests build

HONG KONG - Thousands of armed police have flooded the streets of Hong Kong in a show of force to prevent protests against a law criminalizing ridicule of China's national anthem.

At lunchtime rallies, police fired pepper bullets into crowds, and arrested at least 180 protesters.

Protests have also been fuelled by growing anger at Beijing's increasing interference in the semi-autonomous city, with the National People's Congress expected to rubber-stamp national security laws today (28).

Roads around the Legislative Council building (LegCo), where lawmakers have begun a second reading debate on the anthem law, had been blocked off since at least Tuesday (26), and pedestrian walkways were cordoned off to all except those with work passes. Shops near LegCo were closed. In the morning rush hour police in riot gear stopped and searched mainly young people outside Hong Kong's MTR railway stations, and lined walkways as commuters shuffled past, prompting accusations on social media that the city had become "a police state".

On social media, protest organizers urged people to "be water" and keep moving throughout the city, but acknowledged it would be difficult to stop the anthem debate without high risk of arrest. "But you can at least make a statement," said one post. Crowds regrouped from lunchtime in Mong Kok, where people including schoolchildren were detained; in Causeway Bay, where police arrested at least 180 people for unauthorised gatherings; and Central, where officers fired pepper ball rounds to disperse crowds, and repeatedly charged at protesters.

Police said people had put rubbish on the roads and thrown objects at officers.

"Police had no other option and needed to employ minimal force, including pepper balls to prevent the relevant illegal and violent behaviour," the force said.

The crowds remained, swearing at police and chanting: "Hong Hong independence, it's the only way."

Shortly before midday, crowds led by the former legislator Leung Kwok-hung gathered at Admiralty station, near LegCo, where they were told by police to

leave or they would be prosecuted. Shouting back, protesters told the police to "be Hongkongers".

They chanted: "Human rights are higher than the regime" and "Five demands, not one less", and demanded the government withdraw the national anthem bill and national security legislation.

A 73-year-old woman who gave the surname Cheung said she swam to Hong Kong from China to "escape the dictatorial rule of the CCP [Chinese Communist party]" when she was 15.

"The Communist party is not trustworthy," she said. "When they say you're guilty then you're guilty. Is there still one country, two systems? Of course we need to fight." A district councillor, Roy Tam, said police had pointed pepper spray at him. "Police use force to intimidate people to disperse gatherings," he said. "Freedom of assembly has gone."

Elsewhere, protesters gathered in Hysan Place shopping centre shouting slogans, including some calling for independence — a demand previously on the fringe but now growing in popularity. Police said they had arrested several young people and teenagers for possession of weapons, including petrol bombs. On Facebook police said protesters had thrown barriers on to rail lines, driven slowly to hold up traffic and set fire to rubbish bins.

Opponents say the anthem bill is another step towards authoritarianism, and could be weaponized against pro-democracy activists and legislators.

Under the proposed law, a person commits an offence if they take various actions with "intent to insult" the anthem, such as changing lyrics or music or singing in a "disrespectful way". It carries financial penalties and jail time of up to three years.

March of the Volunteers is the national anthem of the People's Republic of China, as well as Hong Kong and Macau, but boosing of the anthem at Hong Kong football marches has previously embarrassed Beijing. Macau enacted laws in January 2019, but Hong Kong's stalled amid political gridlock which later descended to violence. The government said it had a constitutional responsibility to enact the law quickly, and has declared it a priority.

By Somini Sengupta

Hosting UN climate talks

Britain proposes full-year pandemic delay

LONDON - International negotiations designed to address the sweeping global threat of climate change will quite likely be delayed by a full year because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Britain, the host of the talks, which were initially scheduled to be held at the end of this year in Glasgow, Scotland, proposed Tuesday (26) they be postponed until November 2021. A decision is to be made today (28) by countries that make up the rotating governing board of the United Nations agency that sponsors the talks.

"Given the uneven spread of COVID-19, this date would present the lowest risk of further postponement and the best chance of delivering an inclusive and ambitious COP," British officials said in a letter to countries in the accord, using shorthand for Conference of the Parties, the formal name of the meeting.

The conference is meant to rally world leaders to chart ways to avert the worst effects of climate change, including fatal heat waves and flooded coastal cities.

It took more than 20 such conferences before countries agreed on the landmark 2015 Paris pact, under which they pledged to keep global average temperatures from rising well below 2 degrees Celsius, or 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit, compared with preindustrial levels.

The next round of talks, the 26th annual COP, is the most important session since then. Countries are expected to announce revised climate targets in order to reach that global target, which remains elusive.

Virus-induced lockdowns around the world have resulted in a sharp drop in greenhouse gas emissions in recent months, but the decline has been nowhere near enough to shake loose the tens of millions lacking running water - to say nothing of air conditioning. Parts of Delhi and elsewhere regularly see scuffles when tankers arrive to deliver water. Last year Chennai made international headlines when the southern city ran out of water entirely.

The heatwave adds to problems the country already has dealing with the spread of coronavirus.

India now has the 10th highest number of coronavirus cases globally, climbing above 150,000 yesterday (27) with almost 4,500 deaths.

It has denied the bill would suppress freedom of speech, and said an offence would occur only if someone expressed their views by publicly and intentionally insulting the national anthem.

Several days have been set aside for debate, and the vote is scheduled for June 4 — the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre and another source of controversy given Hong Kong's vigil this year won't be allowed.

On Sunday (24) thousands joined an unauthorised protest against both the anthem bill and Beijing's plan to impose national security laws, which was quickly cracked down on by police. Hong Kong media reported yesterday (27) that Beijing had expanded the scope of the draft security law legislation. "Mainland lawyers who have handled national security cases in the past say this change could bring not just individuals, but also organizations under the scope of the law," RTHK said.

On Tuesday (26), the US president, Donald Trump, warned he would take action against China if it imposed the laws. Trump didn't say if it involved sanctions or changes to the city's special trading status but his press secretary, Kayleigh McEnany, said the president was "displeased", and it was "hard to see how Hong Kong can remain a financial hub if China takes over".

The president's vague warning came hours after his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, said China's military must increase its preparations for armed confrontations.

"It is necessary to step up preparations for armed combat, to flexibly carry out actual combat military training, and to improve our military's ability to perform military missions," he told military officers on the sidelines of the country's annual Two Sessions political gathering.

The comments, which did not refer to Hong Kong directly, came just a day after the commander of the People's Liberation Army garrison stationed in Hong Kong said his troops — estimated to number around 10,000 — stood ready to "safeguard" Chinese sovereignty in the city and support national security laws.

-The Guardian

By Kate Conger and Davey Alba

Twitter refutes inaccuracies in Trump's tweets for first time

OAKLAND, Calif. — Twitter added information to refute the inaccuracies in President Donald Trump's tweets for the first time on Tuesday (26), after years of pressure over its inaction on his false and threatening posts.

The social media company added links late Tuesday to two of Trump's tweets in which he had posted about mail-in ballots and falsely claimed that they would cause the November presidential election to be "rigged".

The links — which were in blue lettering at the bottom of the posts and punctuated by an exclamation mark — urged people to 'get the facts' about voting by mail. Clicking on the links led to a CNN story that said Trump's claims were unsubstantiated and to a list of bullet points that Twitter had compiled rebutting the inaccuracies.

The warning labels were a minor addition to Trump's tweets, but they represented a big shift in how Twitter deals with the president.

For years, the San Francisco company has faced criticism over Trump's posts on his most favoured social media platform, which he has used to bully, cajole and spread falsehoods. But Twitter has repeatedly said the president's messages did not violate its terms of service and that while Trump may have skirted the line of what was accepted under its rules, he never crossed it.

That changed Tuesday after a fierce backlash over tweets that Trump had posted about Lori Klausutis, a young woman who died in 2001 from complications of an undiagnosed heart condition while working for Joe Scarborough, a Florida congressman at the time. As part of his long-running feud with Scarborough, a host for MSNBC, Trump had posted false conspiracy theories about Klausutis' death in recent days, suggesting that Scarborough was involved.

Early Tuesday, a letter from the widower of Klausutis addressed to Jack Dorsey, Twitter's chief executive, became public. In it, Timothy Klausutis asked Twitter to delete Trump's tweets about his late wife, calling them "horrifically lies".

Scarborough also called the tweets "unspeakably cruel". Others, including Katie Couric and CNN anchor Jake Tapper, expressed sympathy for the Klausutis family, with Tapper calling Trump's tweets "malicious lies".

Twitter said it was "deeply sorry about the pain these statements" were causing the Klausutis family, but said it would not remove Trump's tweets because they did not violate its policies. Instead, the company added warning labels to other messages posted by the president on Tuesday, where he claimed the mail-in ballots themselves would be illegally printed. Twitter determined that those unsubstantiated assertions could lead to voter confusion and that they merited a correction, said a person with knowledge of the deliberations who was not authorized to speak publicly. The changes immediately set off accusations by Trump, who has more than 80 million followers on Twitter, and his 2020 re-election campaign that the company was biased against him. In a tweet, Trump said the company was "interfering in the 2020 Presidential Election" and added, in another post, that it was "completely stifling FREE SPEECH."

Brad Parscale, a manager of the Trump 2020 campaign, said, "We always knew that Silicon Valley would pull out all the stops to obstruct and interfere with President Trump getting his message through to voters." A Twitter spokesman said Trump's tweets about mail-in ballots "contain potentially misleading information about voting processes and have been labelled to provide additional context."

Disinformation experts said Twitter's move indicated how social media platforms that had once declared themselves neutral were increasingly having to abandon that stance.

"This is the first time that Twitter has done something that has in some small way attempted to rein in the president," said Tiffany C. Li, a visiting professor at Boston University School of Law. "There's been a gradual shift in the way that Twitter has treated content moderation. You see them taking on more of their duty and responsibility to create a healthy online speech environment." The dilemma with Trump has put Dorsey under scrutiny. In a series of tweets last October, Dorsey said the company would ban all political ads from the service because they presented challenges to civic discourse, "all at increasing velocity, sophistication, and overwhelming scale." He worried such ads had "significant ramifications that today's democratic infrastructure may not be prepared to handle."

Yet Dorsey had appeared unwilling to tackle Trump's tweets even though disinformation experts said political tweets from world leaders often reach a wider audience than political ads and have a greater power to misinform.

Still, election misinformation is a sore spot for Twitter and Dorsey. The company faced heavy criticism, along with Facebook, for allowing Russian disinformation to run rampant on the platform during the 2016 presidential election.

In 2018, Dorsey testified before Congress that he would put a stop to social media campaigns that sought to dissuade voters from participating in democracy.

Twitter is not the only tech company struggling with moderating Trump's threats and falsehoods online. Over the past few days, Trump posted identical comments about Lori Klausutis' death on Facebook. One of his posts there gained about 4,000 comments and 2,000 shares and was not mentioned by Timothy Klausutis. On Twitter, that same post, which questioned whether Scarborough had gotten away with murder, was shared 31,000 times and received 23,000 replies.

For years, Twitter took a hands-off approach to moderating the posts on its platform. That brought it acclaim when it enabled dissidents to tweet about political protests, like the Egyptian revolution in 2011. But it also allowed trolls, bots and malicious operatives onto the site, making Twitter an epicentre for harassment, misinformation and abuse.

In 2018, after all the criticism about the platform following the 2016 election, Dorsey said he would focus on moulding Twitter to support "healthy" conversations. But Trump himself largely escaped enforcement. Although he sometimes deleted his own tweets when they contained misspellings, Twitter mostly left his posts alone.

-New York Times

India wilts under heatwave as temperature hits 50 degrees Celsius

NEW DELHI - India is wilting under a heatwave, with the temperature in places reaching 50 degrees Celsius (122 degrees Fahrenheit) and the capital enduring its hottest May day in nearly two decades.

The hot spell is projected to scorch northern India for several more days, the Meteorological Department said late Tuesday (26), "with severe heat wave conditions in isolated pockets."

As global temperatures rise, heatwaves are a regular menace in the country - particularly in May and June. Last year dozens of people died. Met officials said Chur

ru in the northern state of Rajasthan was the hottest place on record on Tuesday, at 50 Celsius, while parts of Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh sweltered in the high 40s. Parts of the capital, New Delhi, recorded the hottest May day in 18 years with the mercury hitting 47.6 Celsius.

No deaths have been reported so far this year, but last year the government said the heat had killed 3,500 people since 2015. There have been fewer fatalities in recent years.

The country of 1.3 billion people suffers from severe water shortages with

tens of millions lacking running water - to say nothing of air conditioning. Parts of Delhi and elsewhere regularly see scuffles when tankers arrive to deliver water. Last year Chennai made international headlines when the southern city ran out of water entirely.

The heatwave adds to problems the country already has dealing with the spread of coronavirus.

India now has the 10th highest number of coronavirus cases globally, climbing above 150,000 yesterday (27) with almost 4,500 deaths.

Last week cyclone Amphan killed more than 100 people as it ravaged in eastern India and Bangladesh, flattening villages, destroying farms and leaving millions without power. Huge swarms of desert locusts, meanwhile, have destroyed nearly 50,000 hectares (125,000 acres) of crops across western and central India, and may enter Delhi in coming days.

The north-eastern states of Assam and Meghalaya are also currently experiencing floods, with more heavy rainfall forecast in the coming days.

- Agence France-Presse

GLOCAL

Daily Express

Sri Lanka's **International** Newspaper

Mahindananda accuses Kuwait of sending ‘their patients’

As government struggles with repatriation crisis

COLOMBO—A prominent governing party politician yesterday (27) accused the Kuwaiti government of sending COVID-19 infected people to Sri Lanka, after many returnees were found to be COVID-19 positive, and a 51-year old woman died from the virus.

Former minister Mahindananda Aluthgamage, in an interview with a private television channel accused the Kuwaiti government of selecting people who were COVID-19 positive and sending them to Sri Lanka on their flights.

“They have struck us with a bomb. They have sent their COVID-19 patients here,” Aluthgamage charged. The migrant workers

who have been repatriated from Kuwait so far are those who have overstayed their visas or had left registered employer's establishment and been declared illegal by the government. They were given an amnesty and repatriated to Sri Lanka.

The Presidential Secretariat in a media statement on Tuesday (26) night said the decision to bring Sri Lankans who want to return home stands, but a new mechanism was to be formulated before planning returnee flights in June.

However, the situation with regards to Sri Lankan migrant workers, in Kuwait, in particular, is reaching crisis proportions. The

Secretariat said almost all the returnees from Kuwait were those being detained at welfare centres or deportation centres in that country.

The migrant workers had been given a month to leave the country, but Sri Lanka pleaded for an extension of the deadline as there were insufficient quarantine spaces to house large numbers of returnees at once.

The Secretariat noted that by May 25, 5,485 Sri Lankans from 20 different countries were brought back and of them, 4,826 were identified by the Ministry of Foreign Relations and Sri Lankan missions overseas. Only five, or 0.01% out of them were found to be COVID-19 positive.

However, 20 out of 197 who returned from Dubai and 96 out of the 150 who returned from Kuwait have tested positive for COVID-19 so far, with more than 300 yet to undergo testing.

The statement said the program to bring back Sri Lankans, who are undergoing many hardships due to the global spread of the virus, commenced last January under the guidance of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, with the repatriation of around 33 students from Wuhan, China on February 1, followed by the repatriation of 839 Sri Lankans pilgrims who were stranded in several cities in India.

-economynext.com/ENCL



Tamil National Alliance leader R. Sampanthan (2R) pays his respects during the funeral of the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) leader Arumugan Thondaman in Colombo yesterday (27). Thondaman, a leader of a minority Tamils of recent Indian origin and former minister, died at the age of 56 of a heart attack on Tuesday (26). His final rites will be conducted in Norwood on Sunday (31). The CWC said his remains will be taken to the Savumiamoorthy Thondaman public grounds in Norwood to be cremated at 4:00 p.m. on Sunday. His remains are currently at his residence in Battaramulla and will be taken to the Parliament premises today (28) where former Parliament members will pay their respects to him, and then to the CWC headquarters in Colombo. On Friday (29) his remains will be taken to Gampola and Ramboda for the public to pay their last respects. On Saturday (30) his remains will be taken to Kotagala via Nanu Oya and Nuwara Eliya, and to Norwood via Hatton on Sunday for the final rites

UNP to suspend membership of rebels

COLOMBO - The United National Party (UNP), in what it has termed as 'protecting the best interest of the party' has decided to suspend the party membership of members who have sought nominations from other political parties, and have sought explanations from such members about their transgression.

In 'show cause' letters sent to the rebel members, UNP General-Secretary Akila Viraj Kariyawasam has said any member who wishes to have his or her name included in the nomination list as a candidate of another political party is mandated in terms of Article 3.4(c) of the UNP Party Constitution, to obtain prior approval from the Working Committee of the UNP.

He has however noted that the members in question, alluding to those who

have joined the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), have not complied with Article 3.4(c) of the party constitution, and have not obtained the prior approval of the Working Committee.

“The said conduct of the members has compelled the Leader of the UNP to act in terms of Article 3.4(h) of the party constitution in order to protect and safeguard the best interest of the Party,” Kariyawasam has said, but has also added that several candidates have expressed their regret for having taken the course of action to contest from other political parties.

He has said any explanation which will be forthcoming from the members will be placed before the Working Committee of the UNP at its next meeting for appropriate action.

-ENCL

FMM condemns intimidation of regional journalist

Calls for broad media reforms to ensure ethical reporting

COLOMBO - The Free Media Movement (FMM) has condemned the obstruction and intimidation of regional journalist Bimal Shyaman, calling it a serious violation of media freedom, while calling for broad media reforms to ensure ethical reporting.

In a statement issued on Tuesday (26), the FMM said, Shyaman, a regional journalist for Hiru, Derana and Swarnavahini Television channels, had been intimidated and harassed on Sunday (24) while reporting the Ramadan celebrations in the Atulugama area, an area under critical scrutiny following the detection of COVID-19 cases.

Citing media reports, the FMM said Shyaman had visited the area on the invitation of the governing body of a local mosque to report on how a community that was isolated and quarantined until a few weeks ago was conducting its religious observances. While the majority of the people had worked closely with the journalist, a

group of people had taken offence at his intrusion, hurled abuse at him and damaged his vehicle. Going by the video clips of the incident broadcast on TV, they had also threatened to harm him, the FMM said, considering the incident a serious violation that should not occur under any circumstance.

However, the Movement wondered if the community behaved in the manner it did due to the manner certain media had reported incidents in the recent past raising doubts and suspicion in the public eye about the residents of Atulugama.

However, the FMM said such issues of media ethics can only be resolved through broad media reform and not by threats or obstructions and urged the parties concerned to provide justice in this regard and the media institutions to empower regional journalists to carry out their reporting work in a broader professional setting.

-ENCL

Addressing COVID-19 challenges

India says committed to standing shoulder to shoulder with SL

COLOMBO – Newly appointed Indian High Commissioner, Gopal Baglay, yesterday (27) reiterated his country's commitment to standing shoulder to shoulder with Sri Lanka in addressing the challenges posed by COVID-19 and in post-COVID economic recovery.

A statement from the Indian High Commission said Baglay, who paid his first call on Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa at Temple Trees in Colombo yesterday, had said his government had identified food, and health security, IT cooperation, tourism exchanges, development cooperation partnership and greater investment flows as priority areas.

The High Commissioner's meeting with the prime minister coincided with the 50th anniversary of the election of Mahinda Rajapaksa to the Sri Lankan Parliament.

Baglay had conveyed the good wishes of the Indian leadership on the occasion, and said he had come with a mandate to deepen India-Sri Lanka bilateral relations, while expanding their close cooperation.

Mahinda Rajapaksa had recalled the long standing relationship with the people and Government of India and reiterated his belief that the bilateral relationship would become stronger with the addition of new areas of cooperation.

The statement said both parties agreed the shared Buddhist heritage and links between India and Sri Lanka would provide a platform for robust people-to-people engagement and for bringing the two peoples closer together.

Rajapaksa, the statement said, had said he would instruct his relevant officials to consult with the High Commission to fur-



ther develop such cooperation. Baglay, had also conveyed the sincere condolences of the Government of India on the sad and untimely demise of Arumugan Thondaman

-ENCL

By P.K. Balachandran

Who will fill the vacuum left by Arumugan Thondaman?

COLOMBO -The unexpected death of the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) leader and Minister of Estate Infrastructure Development, Arumugan Thondaman on Tuesday (26) has left a vacuum in the leadership of the CWC.

The Congress will have to find a leader who has the aggression and the political sense and skill of Arumugan to successfully navigate through the Sri Lankan political system dominated by Sinhala-majoritarian parties. The new leader will also have to have the iron will and the deftness needed to keep the CWC from splitting into various rival groups.

As of date, the CWC is the single largest trade union and political party among Indian origin plantation workers. According to one of its former leaders, P. P. Devaraj, the CWC is a well-oiled machine with a history going back to 1939.

So far, it has had two strong top leaders, namely Savumiamoorthy Thondaman and his grandson Arumugan Thondaman. The senior Thondaman got Sri Lankan citizenship for the stateless plantation workers, and set up the trend of joining governments, no matter what its political colour, in order to keep serving the plantation workers.

Arumugan Thondaman brought aggression to CWC's political culture which gave the historically downtrodden plantation workers a sense of power in their dealings with plantation managements, the Sinhala politicians and the government. Over the years, the CWC has also had very competent, educated, and skilful second line leaders.

Though the CWC has had its share of splits and many stalwarts left it to found their own outfits, the organization has managed to survive and continue to be the single-most powerful force in the plantation sector.

The new leader has to maintain the status quo if not improve the status and power of the CWC. Among those in the reckoning for the top slot are Arumugan's son Jeevan Thondaman and his nephew Senthil Thondaman.

While Jeevan is a barrister and has intellectual ability, he is only 24 years old and with only a year's experience in politics. But he has one great advantage – he is the son of the departed leader, Arumugan Thondaman.

Grieving plantation workers are expected to endorse Jeevan's succession automatically, as per the South Asian political tradition.

His supporters say Jeevan's lack of experience can be compensated by putting together a band of experienced second line leaders. Further, the officials of the CWC, being experienced and competent, need not look to a leader for directions on a day-to-day basis. This should make up for Jeevan's inexperience.

The other candidate for the top post is Senthil Thondaman, who besides being a nephew of Arumugan Thondaman, has ten years' experience in politics and has been a minister in the Uva Province. Senthil is close to the ruling Rajapaksa clan as he had had an excellent personal relationship with Sashindra Rajapaksa, who was Uva Chief Minister when the current Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa was President of Sri Lanka.

Through Sashindra, Senthil was able to get many of his ministerial projects sanctioned by the Mahinda Rajapaksa government. Senthil has continued to maintain close relations with the Rajapaksas. Currently, he coordinates Mahinda Rajapaksa's dealings with the plantation sector.

It is significant that Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa was the first top Lankan leader to rush to the Thalangama Hospital on hearing about Arumugan Thondaman's death.

But Senthil Thondaman has one handicap. In contrast to Jeevan Thondaman, Senthil's political arena is, and has been, the Badulla district in the Uva Province and not in the Indian Origin Tamil heartland, Nuwara Eliya district in the Central Province.

Most of the top leaders of the CWC have come from Nuwara Eliya district which also sends the largest number of Indian Origin Tamils to Parliament. Sources say Senthil may want to shift to Nuwara Eliya district. In that case, he will clash with Jeevan. And that may result in a split in the CWC in Nuwara Eliya.

It is also said that Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa could acquire a role in determining who will lead the CWC. Given the close relations he has maintained with Senthil Thondaman, Rajapaksa might back him. However, if CWC members cast their lot with Jeevan, Mahinda Rajapaksa will extend support to him as he is interested in helping the CWC maintain its unity and integrity. The CWC is a key pillar support for the Rajapaksas among Indian Origin Tamils in the plantations.

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About the Author

P.K. Balachandran is a senior Colombo-based journalist who, in the past two decades, has reported for *The Hindustan Times*, *The New Indian Express* and *Economist*




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INSIGHT

By Swati Chaturvedi

COVID-19 in India

When migrant workers walked thousands of miles home

What do you write when you run out of words?

When a tragedy becomes so searing that you shut down how you process horror and grief?

How do we lose our humanity?

Is it when we collectively mute a tragedy? The migrants' exodus is comparable to the partition of India.

I am a comparatively young Indian in a country, which is millenniums old. I did not bear witness to the partition of India in 1947 nor the emergency imposed in 1975. Yet, I now believe that we are a complicit people.

We watch unshaken and unmoved videos of migrants eating a dog on the highway tortured by hunger beyond belief. We watch as migrants denied dignity in life are denied even humanity in death as after being mowed down by a vehicle, their remains are hurriedly swept up into giant black garbage bags.

There is a lot to unpick here. Things to note. Let me venture a prophesy. India's handling of the migrants exodus will be one of the cautionary tales when history takes a view of the virulent coronavirus pandemic.

A democracy with no humanity?

India, the world's largest democracy, as we never tire of describing ourselves, sat back perhaps in the yogic lotus position and did absolutely nothing as thousands of citizens started walking the highways in a bid to go to an elusive home. They don't have food and water, things that most of us are guaranteed in our lovely homes with balconies where we collectively bang thalis to make the virus go away.

Despite the harshest lockdown in the world imposed at four hours' notice, the virus did not go away, the poor people, our hostages to fortune, did. Some perspective my dear readers. The coronavirus came to India via international flights. India was not shutdown when United States President Donald Trump came calling on a state visit on February 24. Prime Minister Narendra Modi took him on a triumphant visit to home state Gujarat and guaranteed a humongous crowd of millions of people.

Yet those of us who had homes could still quarantine safely. The poor could not. And they paid the price. The leaders of our democracy are so out of touch, so defeated by the idea of Modi that they did not even put up a feeble fight for the people in whose name they commandeer power and privilege.

One more perspective. Most of the migrants come from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Yet, we did not hear from our regional Uttar Pradesh powerhouses: Mayawati, chief of the BahujanSamaj Party, and Akhilesh Yadav, chief of the Samajwadi Party. One saw some desultory outreach by the Congress party represented by Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi - nothing that would make Modi and Amit Shah even break a sweat.

The worst villain for the migrants is Nitish Kumar, Bihar chief minister, the man with the most bendy conscience in the universe, who is in such thrall to his ally, the BJP, that he refused to even acknowledge the crisis. And such is the state of the Opposition in Bihar that he was allowed to get away with it.

Final perspective. The elections in Bihar will be held this year.

So how does it stack up in the world's largest democracy?

Our leaders' response to the desperately needy migrants was AWOL. And the natural corollary to that is a government that simply does not care.

PS: Did I mention treating the dead as road-kill?

PPS: Don't look away.

-Swati Chaturvedia is an award – winning journalist and author of 'I am a Troll: Inside the secret world of the BJP's Digital Army.'
Her Twitter handle is @bainjal



- Jim Huylebroek/The New York Times

Taliban prisoners are lined up at the Bagram military base before being released in Afghanistan, on Tuesday (26). The Taliban stand on the brink of realizing their most fervent desire: US troops leaving Afghanistan. They have given up little of their extremist ideology to do it

By Mujib Mashal

Tenacity and carnage

How the Taliban outlasted a superpower

ALINGAR — Under the shade of a mulberry tree, near grave sites dotted with Taliban flags, a top insurgent military leader in eastern Afghanistan acknowledged that the group had suffered devastating losses from US strikes and government operations over the past decade.

But those losses have changed little on the ground: The Taliban keep replacing their dead and wounded and delivering brutal violence.

“We see this fight as worship,” said Mawlawi Mohammed Qais, the head of the Taliban’s military commission in Laghman province, as dozens of his fighters waited nearby on a hillside. “So if a brother is killed, the second brother won’t disappoint God’s wish — he’ll step into the brother’s shoes.”

It was March, and the Taliban had just signed a peace deal with the United States that now puts the movement on the brink of realizing its most fervent desire — the complete exit of US troops from Afghanistan.

The Taliban have outlasted a superpower through nearly 19 years of grinding war. And dozens of interviews with Taliban officials and fighters in three countries, as well as with Afghan and Western officials, illuminated the melding of old and new approaches and generations that helped them do it.

After 2001, the Taliban reorganized as a decentralized network of fighters and low-level commanders empowered to recruit and find resources locally while the senior leadership remained sheltered in neighbouring Pakistan.

The insurgency came to embrace a system of terrorism planning and attacks that kept the Afghan government under withering pressure, and to expand an illicit funding engine built on crime and drugs despite its roots in austere Islamic ideology.

At the same time, the Taliban have officially changed little of their harsh founding ideology as they prepare to start direct talks about power-sharing with the Afghan government.

“We prefer the agreement to be fully implemented so we can have an all-encompassing peace,” Amir Khan Mutaqi, the chief of staff to the Taliban’s supreme leader, said in a rare interview in Doha, Qatar, with The New York Times. “But we also can’t just sit here when the prisons are filled with our people, when the system of government is the same Western system, and the Taliban should just go sit at home.”

“No logic accepts that — that everything stays the same after all this sacrifice,” he said, adding, “The current government stands on foreign money, foreign weapons, on foreign funding.” A grim history looms. The last time an occupying power

left Afghanistan — when the US-backed mujahedeen insurgency helped push the Soviets to withdraw in 1989 — guerrillas toppled the remaining government and then fought each other over its remains, with the Taliban coming out on top.

Now, even as US forces and the insurgents have stopped attacking each other, the Taliban intensified their assaults against the Afghan forces before a rare three-day truce this week for the Eid holiday. Their tactics appear aimed at striking fear.

Taliban field commanders made clear that they were holding fire only on US troops to give them safe passage — “so they dust off their buttocks and depart,” as one senior Taliban commander in the south said. But there was no reserve about continuing to attack the Afghan Security Forces.

“Our fight started before America — against corruption. The corrupt begged America to come because they couldn’t fight,” a young commander of the Taliban elite ‘Red Unit’ in Alingar said. He was a toddler when the US invasion began, and met up with a Times reporting team in the area where government control gives way to the Taliban.

“Until an Islamic system is established,” said the commander, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, “our jihad will continue until doomsday.”

The Taliban now have somewhere between 50,000 and 60,000 active fighters and tens of thousands of part-time armed men and facilitators, according to Afghan and US estimates.

It is not, however, a monolithic organization. The insurgency’s leadership built a war machine out of disparate and far-flung parts, and pushed each cell to try to be locally self-sufficient. In areas they control, or at least influence, the Taliban also try to administer some services and resolve disputes, continuously positioning themselves as a shadow government.

Even at the peak of the long US military presence and the coordinating effort to help the Afghan government win hearts and minds in the countryside, the Taliban were able to keep recruiting enough young men to keep fighting. Families keep answering the Taliban’s call, and booming profits help hold it all together.

In the second decade of the insurgency, the Taliban have been defined by the ruthlessness of their violence — and by their ability to strike at will even in the most guarded parts of the Afghan capital, Kabul.

They have packed sewage trucks, vans and even an ambulance with explosives, striking at the heart of the city with hundreds of casualties. They have penetrated the ranks of Afghan forces with infiltrators who have opened fire at Afghan

commanders, and once even at the top American general in Afghanistan.

When the United States began negotiating in 2018 with a delegation of the Taliban in Doha, across the table were architects of the insurgency — and the survivors of it. Nearly half of the Taliban negotiating delegation had spent a decade each in Guantánamo.

Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the lead Taliban negotiator, had just been released after 10 years in Pakistani prison, detained because he had made contacts for peace talks with the Afghan government without the blessing of the Pakistani military establishment that had nurtured the insurgency.

One main concern among American and Afghan officials was whether the Taliban’s political wing had true influence among the insurgency’s military commanders.

Taliban officials say what sets them apart from the factions that fought against the Soviet Union and then broke into anarchy over power is that their allegiance was divided to more than a dozen leaders. The Taliban began their insurgency under the authority of a single emir, Mullah Mohammad Omar. But the insurgency reached its greatest heights more recently, with a leadership structure that depends on consensus and then strikes with a heavy fist against any who disobey from within.

Even as new commanders emerged in recent years, much of the leadership council is made up of the older crew that established the insurgency in the years after the US invasion. The old political leaders acknowledge the balancing act they face is like no challenge the insurgency has faced before. They have made sure to tightly control the rationale for their violence — it is a holy war for as long as their supreme leader and clerics decree it to be.

Timor Sharan, an Afghan researcher and former senior government official, said that unity has been easier to maintain with a common enemy, the US military, to fight. But if the Taliban eventually win their dream of an Afghanistan without the Americans, he said, they will face many of the challenges that once dragged the country into anarchy.

“The relationship between the political leaders and the military commanders who have monopoly over resources and violence will be tested,” he said.

“The 1990s civil war in Kabul happened not because the political leaders couldn’t agree among each other — it happened because the commanders who had monopoly of violence at the bottom wanted to expand on their resources. The political leaders were hopeless in controlling them.”

-New York Times

By Raji Krishna

Unswervingly, fully and faithfully

Justifying a resolution seen as a virtual takeover of Hong Kong’s security

NEW DELHI - China's National Peoples' Congress is poised to pass a resolution seeking a virtual take over the security of the autonomous region of Hong Kong in response to the unrest there.

China considers the unrest, which has been on since 2019, to be foreign-inspired terroristic separatism, aided and abetted by its arch rival, the United States. The Western world, which is very apprehensive about the rise of China as an economic and military power casting covetous eyes on a world still under the influence or hegemony of the West, is portraying Beijing's bid in Hong Kong as an assault on democracy and the principle of autonomy. It considers the move a violation of the solemn pledge to uphold the principle of 'One Nation, Two Systems' as enshrined in the Sino-British agreement under which the British colony was transferred to China at the end of a 99-year lease in 1997.

Till 2019 or thereabouts, the 'One Nation, Two Systems' worked because Beijing drew benefits from Hong Kong's economic links with the West and the West in turn enjoyed virtually the same economic rights as it did before. But the West's comfort decreased sharply when, under President XiJinping, China began to expand its economic links to cover the globe, and become a determining factor in global finance and infrastructure development through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The fact that China was also becoming a military power throwing its weight about in the South China Sea and the Indo-Pacific Ocean raised the hackles further.

The increasing Sino-West tension in the world, with the West alleging that China is trapping resource-rich but poor countries in unbearable debts and threatening free navigation in the Indo-Pacific Ocean, led to Beijing's getting alerted to sabotage using Hong Kong as a cockpit of Western intrigue.

Beijing's first step towards tightening control over Hong Kong was to enact an extradition law, which to violent street protests allegedly aided and abetted by the US. The protests led to the withdrawal of the extradition bill. But the controversy over the origin of the novel coronavirus and the US-led Western campaign to pin down China on this with court cases, demands for astronomical amounts as compensation and economic and political sanctions, increased China's perception of the external threat manifold.

It was in this context that a decision was taken to virtually takeover the security of Hong Kong through a new bill, while maintaining the autonomy of Hong Kong under 'One Nation, Two Systems' concept.

Threats from outside are often a key factor in shaping internal security arrangements. Since China faces no threat to its position in the Autonomous Region of Macau (transferred to China by the Portuguese in 1999), the proposed security law will not apply to Macau or any other Autonomous Region other than Hong Kong.

Given the global opposition to its bid to change the Hong Kong Security Law, the Chinese government is assuring the world the proposed law will preserve all the freedoms now enjoyed by locals and foreign investors. According to an explanatory note put out by Xinhua, the draft legislation states that China will "unswervingly, fully and faithfully" implement the principles of 'One Country, Two Systems' and that "the people of Hong Kong will enjoy a high degree of autonomy." The official position is that the national security legislation only targets those who attempt to "split the country, subvert state power, and organize and carry out terrorist activities, as well as foreign and external forces seeking to interfere in Hong Kong's affairs, and will in no way harm the daily lives of law-abiding Hong Kong residents."

It further states "the extensive rights and freedoms enjoyed by Hong Kong residents, such as freedom of speech, freedom of the press, right to assembly and demonstration, to engage in academic research, to travel and to enter or leave the HKSAR (the official name of Hong Kong) will all remain fully protected by the Basic Law, the Hong Kong Bill of Rights Ordinance and other laws," and goes on to assure, "After the legislation is enacted, the personal safety and property of Hong Kong residents will be even better protected and their basic rights and freedoms better guaranteed."

On the security of foreign investments it says legislation will not affect foreign investors' legitimate interests, but will make Hong Kong a safer and more stable place and improve the confidence of local and overseas investors in doing business in Hong Kong.

As regards Hong Kong's legal system, the note says the legislation will only plug the very apparent loopholes and legal vacuum in national security and does not affect Hong Kong courts which, under the Basic Law, exercise independent judicial power, including that of final adjudication.

Justifying the tough measures, the explanatory note states prolonged social unrest has hurt business confidence in Hong Kong and as the country has gone through months of disruption, violence and uncertainties, anything that can stabilize the situation will indeed help recover investor sentiment.

The note points out that major Western countries, including the United States and Britain, have their own national security laws and have created a large number of cases through judicial decisions. The National Security Act of the United States was signed into law by then US President Harry Truman on July 26, 1947. It also enacted the USA PATRIOT Act after the September 11 attacks and the CLOUD Act. Britain passed the Official Secrets Act of 1911 to tackle espionage and renewed it with the Official Secrets Act of 1989. Several more acts on anti-terrorism and national security were enacted after the September 11 attacks. "In general, Western countries have built sound legal systems on national security, covering legislation, law enforcement, prosecution, trials and other aspects," the note says.

-ENCL

By Andrew Leeson

Bushfire-hit Australians still in tents as virus slows recovery

COBARGO - Victims of Australia's catastrophic bushfires are still living in tents, garages and makeshift shelters months after the blazes ended, with efforts to rebuild their lives hampered by the coronavirus pandemic.

Inside a small tin shed on Australia's southeast coast, a family of six takes refuge from the cold as the southern hemisphere winter begins to bite.

The structure - chock-full of toys and beds - has been home to 51-year-old Anita Lawrence and five of her children since February.

She had been in Tasmania when fires ripped through the area, torching materials ready to build a new home and new life for her family.

"Every single little thing disappeared," she told AFP near trees still blackened from the blazes.

Australia's unprecedented bushfire crisis that scorched an area larger than most nations and displaced thousands put a rare spotlight on climate change in a rich, developed country. The disaster sparked charity telethons, government promises

of a quick recovery and donations from across the world.

But six months on and just six hours drive from hyper-affluent Sydney, scores of people like Lawrence are still living in limbo.

"When you come back, and there's so much destruction, everything is difficult," she said.

Before the crisis Lawrence had got by working a few days a week at the local school, teaching the kids gardening.

During the months-long lockdown she survived on pension savings and struggled to home-school her own children using a single computer connected to a mobile-phone hotspot.

Now schools are going back and some help has arrived, in the form of local man David Crooke and his crew who have put together an extension for their dwelling.

It is temporary, but Lawrence now has a bathroom, heating and a bedroom until she can find a way to build a permanent home.

Crooke's small team - hired by private donors - has been building shelters for

those who would otherwise be destitute for months.

"There's places that are completely wiped out - our next job we go to, the ladies have a little tent in a shipping container right now," he said.

He himself lost his home to the fires last year and spent the summer battling blazes.

Armed with four homemade water pumps, his team saved several homes as fires repeatedly hit the southern coast of New South Wales.

Since then he has been camping out in increasingly harsh conditions - moving from property to property, and helping build shelters. But with ageing equipment and a struggle to find materials, the physical and emotional toll was "flogging" the team, he said.

"None of my crew have got really anything, you know, we're week-to-week sort of guys, you rely on that paycheque big time."

Throughout the area, signs of life are springing from the charred-out landscape, but 66-year-old Wayne Keft said

the recovery has been "slow and difficult" for many. His home near Cobargo was destroyed when "a fireball went through the front of the house."

He now lives in a garage, and is plagued by dust that blows in off a road nearby.

A surveyor's stake for work on his new home sits in a barrel nearby, useless until the ruins of the old structure are cleared by crews who have been operating for months on similar jobs in the area.

Help has slowed since global attention shifted from bushfires to the pandemic.

Mathew Hatcher said his warehouse in nearby Batemans Bay was once full of donated goods.

"We were churning along, a very well-oiled machine, then COVID hit, and it kind of stopped the donations," said Hatcher, coordinator of South Coast Donations Logistics Team.

The virus had also meant many larger organizations had to pull out volunteers, leaving locals struggling through trauma without appropriate mental health support, he said.

- Agence France-Presse