

Bhutan PM thanks Modi for additional 4,00,000 COVID-19 vaccine doses

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Thimpu, Mar 22 : On receiving additional 400,000 doses of Covishield from India on Monday, Bhutan Prime Minister Lotay Tshering thanked Narendra Modi for making the nationwide rollout of the COVID-19 vaccination programme in the Himalayan country possible. Earlier in the day, the vaccine consignment was handed over to the Foreign Minister Tandi Dorji at Paro airport by Indian Ambassador Ruchira Kamboj, a press release issued by the Indian Embassy in Bhutan said. Going forward India will continue to resolutely stand by Bhutan in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, it said.



Bhutan, which was the first country to receive the Government of India's gift of the COVID vaccines, manufactured by the Serum Institute of India (SII), received the first consignment of 1.5 lakh doses in January. The 550,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccine by India will enable Bhutan to launch its nationwide

vaccination drive from March 27 onwards. The entire eligible population of Bhutan will, thus, be inoculated with the first dose of the made-in-India COVID vaccine. Thus, Bhutan is likely to be one of the first countries to protect its entire population against COVID-19, with assistance from India, the release said. Today Tshering, in a tweet, prayed that these gestures from India during the pandemic turn into boundless blessings for the people of India. "Pleased to receive additional 400,000 doses of Covishield,

making possible the nationwide rollout of our vaccination programme. People of Bhutan and I remain grateful@narendramodi," he said in a tweet. Pleased to receive additional 400,000 doses of Covishield, making possible the nationwide rollout of our vaccination program. People of Bhutan and I remain grateful@narendramodi. We pray these gestures during the pandemic turn into boundless blessings for the people of India. pic.twitter.com/Ify-ovaOLzo Recalling Prime Minister Modi's virtual address to the UN General Assembly in September last year on India's vaccine production and delivery capacity to help humanity in fighting the COVID-19 crisis, Kamboj re-

iterated that "India will be a force for good in the neighbourhood. It is committed to improving the well-being of the region." As a reflection of the special bonds of trust and understanding between India and Bhutan that have existed over decades, the Indian government had earlier handed over ten consignments of medical supplies, one portable X-Ray machine, essential medicines and medical equipment in addition to the vaccine consignments. According to Johns Hopkins University data, Bhutan has reported 869 coronavirus cases and one death. As part of the "Vaccine Maitri" initiative, India has supplied over 60 million doses of made-in-India COVID-19 vaccine to 72 nations.

China returns eight activists jailed for trying to flee Hong Kong

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Beijing, Mar 22 : Eight out of a dozen Hong Kong activists detained last year by Chinese authorities after attempting to flee to Taiwan have been returned to the city, the Hong Kong government said. Known as the "Hong Kong 12", the group were captured at sea by the Chinese coastguard last August as they tried to reach Taiwan by speedboat. The group who returned on Monday were all found guilty in December of attempting an illegal border crossing by a court in the Chinese city of Shenzhen, which is just across the border from Hong Kong. Two underage members were returned to Hong Kong without facing prosecution while Tang Kai-yin and Quinn Moon, who were identified as group "leaders", were sentenced to three and two years in prison respectively, according to Hong Kong media.

Most of the group, who were between the ages of 17 and 33 at the time of detention, were fleeing charges related to protest activities in Hong Kong and may face further prosecution now they have returned home. Charges include rioting, assaulting a police officer, making a petrol bomb, possession of an offensive weapon, and making explosives, the Hong Kong government said. "This is a bittersweet moment for Hong Kong. On the one hand, we welcome the fact that eight of the 12 are being returned to Hong Kong, but on the other, they face an uncertain future, with some facing trial and jail under the national security law. It's a case of out of the frying pan, into the fire," said Johnny Patterson, the policy director of the UK-based Hong Kong Watch. Among the eight returned on Monday were Andy Li, who faces charges of collusion with a foreign country under the city's new national security legislation, according to Amnesty International. The plight of the Hong Kong 12 captured the attention of foreign governments including the US and UK, amid reports they had been denied access to legal representation by Chinese authorities, according to rights groups, while their families also had little knowledge of their conditions. Several hundred protesters are believed to have fled to democratic Taiwan since Hong Kong's 2019 pro-democracy protests. In July, Taiwan's government opened a special office to help Hong Kong protesters and those seeking asylum, although cases remain low due to Covid-19 travel restrictions. ... as you join us today from India, we have a small favour to ask. You've read 5 articles in the last year. And you're not alone; through these turbulent and challenging times, millions rely on the Guardian for independent journalism that stands for truth and integrity. Readers chose to support us financially more than 1.5 million times in 2020, joining existing supporters in 180 countries.

U.S. "deeply concerned" as China tries Canadians in secret in case seen as Huawei retaliation

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Beijing, Mar 22 : The trial of Michael Kovrig, the Canadian detained for more than two years in China on espionage charges, started on Monday, with relations between Ottawa and Beijing in freefall. The hearing comes days after the closed-door trial of another Canadian man, with both detained in apparent retaliation for Canada's arrest on a U.S. extradition warrant of Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou. Kovrig, a former diplomat, was detained in 2018 and formally charged last June with spying at the same time as his compatriot, businessman Michael Spavor. On Monday, police cordoned off an area outside the Beijing court as Canadian diplomats were denied entry and turned away. A court official told reporters no entry was allowed be-

cause the trial is a national security case. Jim Nickel, the charge d'affaires of the Canadian embassy in Beijing, told reporters that he was "very troubled by the lack of access and lack of transparency in the legal process." Representatives of 26 countries had gathered outside the building on Monday, Nickel said, and were "lending their voice" for Kovrig's immediate release. The U.S. is "deeply concerned at the lack of minimum procedural protections granted the two Canadian citizens." William Klein, Acting Deputy Chief of Mission of the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, told media outside the court. Following that closed-door hearing, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau called the two men's detention "completely unacceptable, as is the lack of transparency around these

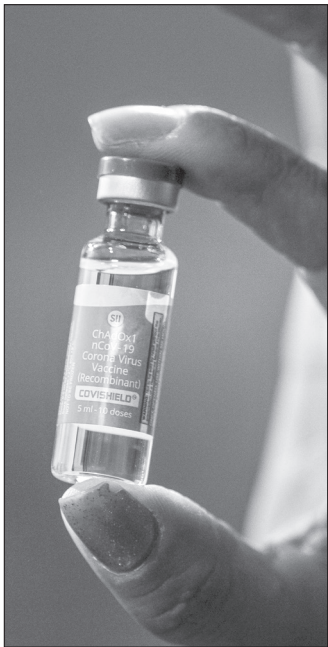
court proceedings." China's foreign ministry on Monday defended diplomats being blocked from entering the court, and criticized those gathering outside as "very unreasonable." "Be it a few or dozens of diplomats trying to gather and exert pressure, it is an interference in China's judicial sovereignty... and not something that a diplomat should do," said foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying. The court dates for the two Canadians come as an extradition hearing for Meng enters its final months, and alongside fiery high-level talks between the U.S. and China in Alaska. Meng, whose father is Huawei founder and CEO Ren Zhengfei, has been fighting extradition to the U.S. on charges that she and the company violated U.S. sanctions on Iran and other laws.

A year ago the U.S. Department of Justice unveiled charges, naming Meng specifically, that accuse Huawei of orchestrating a successful "decades-long" scheme to steal trade secrets from U.S. technology companies. While Kovrig's trial was still ongoing late Monday afternoon, Canada's former ambassador to China, Guy Saint-Jacques, told AFP he expected proceedings will be short. "China does not even try to make this look like a real trial as evidence is not shared with the defense and the judge does not even take the time to review it," he said ahead of the hearing. "It just confirms that the process is pre-ordained by the Communist Party and this is a political case." China's judicial system convicts most people who stand trial and the two men face up to life in prison if found guilty of "espionage" and "providing state secrets."

Hungary approves India's Covishield, new Chinese Covid vaccine for emergency use

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Budapest, Mar 22 : Budapest: The spreading third wave presents a big challenge for the PM, who said tough lockdown measures could start to ease once the vaccination figure reached 2.5 mn people. Hungary is the first European Union (EU) country to approve for emergency use China's CanSino Biologics coronavirus vaccine and CoviShield, the Indian version of the AstraZeneca shot, the Hungarian surgeon general said on Monday. New infections are surging in Hungary in a third wave of the pandemic, even as vaccine import and usage rates are among the highest in the EU with the country using Chinese and Russian vaccines as well as Western ones. If both new vaccines are also approved for mass use by the National Health Centre, Hungary will have seven sources to procure vaccines from. It was unclear when and in what quantity Hungary planned to deploy the newly authorised vaccines, or how it planned to buy them. "We are in a race against time," Surgeon General Cecilia Muller told a news briefing. "We will overturn the four corners of the world for as many doses of prop-



er efficient and safe vaccines as possible." Hospitalisation rates are at record levels, and even as Prime Minister Viktor Orban on Friday said the health system would cope, some hospitals are so overwhelmed by the influx of patients that they are asking untrained volunteers to help. The spreading third wave presents a big challenge for Orban, who said tough lockdown measures could start to ease once the vaccination figure reached 2.5 million people, or a quarter of the population. Orban faces elections in 2022.

Taiwan loses two fighter jets in apparent collision, third such crash in six months

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Taipei, Mar 22 : Two Taiwanese fighter jets crashed on Monday in the third such incident in the past half year, at a time when the Beijing-claimed island's armed forces are under increasing pressure to intercept Chinese aircraft on an almost daily basis. While Taiwan's air force is well trained and well equipped, mostly with U.S.-made equipment, it is dwarfed by China's. Beijing views the democratic island as its own territory and has never renounced the use of force to bring it under Chinese control. Taiwan's air force said two air force F-5E fighters, each with one pilot aboard, crashed into the sea off the island's southeastern coast after they apparently collided in mid-air during a training mission. One pilot was found and air-lifted



to hospital by helicopter but later died, while the other is missing, air force Chief of Staff Huang Chih-wei told reporters, adding the aircraft were in good working order. The air force has now grounded the

F-5 fleet and suspended all training missions, he said. The U.S.-built F-5 fighters first entered service in Taiwan in the 1970s and have been mostly retired from front-line activities, though

some are still used for training and as a back-up for the main fleet. Another F-5 crashed in October, killing the pilot. The following month a much more modern F-16 crashed off Taiwan's east coast, and the pilot of that aircraft also died. In January of last year, Taiwan's top military official was among eight people killed after a helicopter carrying them to visit soldiers crashed in a mountainous area near the capital Taipei. The incidents have raised concern about both training and maintenance, but also the pressure the air force is under to respond to repeated Chinese flights near the island. Taiwan's Defence Ministry has warned Chinese aircraft, including drones, are flying repeatedly in Taiwan's air defence identification zone, seeking to wear out Taiwan's air force.

British Army: UK Government plans to cut 10,000 troops condemned as 'reckless'

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London, Mar 22 : Plans unveiled by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) would leave the overall strength of the army at around 72,500, with other branches of the military braced to lose some "industrial age" capabilities, with older tanks, ships and warplanes to be axed or phased out early. The details emerged despite a 2019 pledge from the Prime Minister that "we will not be cutting our armed services in any form." Mr Johnson added at the time: "We will be maintaining the size of our armed services." But following the publication last week of the integrated review of foreign and defence policy, ministers say the changes

are necessary to create a more agile military capable of countering evolving threats around the globe. Under the plans, the Royal Marines are set to be transformed into a new Future Commando Force (FCF) to be deployed around the world on an "enduring basis". The MoD said the FCF would take on many of the traditional tasks of the Special Forces, the SAS and SBS, alongside a new Army Ranger Regiment announced last week. The FCF will see the Royal Marines evolve from an "amphibious infantry" held at readiness in the UK to a versatile, special operations-capable force "persistently forward deployed". Prime Minister Boris Johnson has been accused of break-

ing his promise to protect the armed forces, amid reports that a major overhaul of the army could see troop numbers cut by around 10,000. (Photo by Peter Morrison - WPA Pool/Getty Images) The unit will receive more than £200 million of direct investment over the next decade to carry out maritime security operations and to "pre-empt and deter sub-threshold activity, and counter state threats". Ahead of the publication of the command paper, defence secretary Ben Wallace said: "From striking Daesh terrorists in Iraq, disrupting drug shipments and deterring Russian aggression in the Baltics, our armed forces already reach where others cannot.

Trump to launch own social media platform, says adviser

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Washington, Mar 22 : Former U.S. President Donald Trump will return to social media with "his own platform" in two or three months, one of his senior advisers has said. Mr Trump was banned from Twitter and suspended indefinitely on Facebook after January's deadly riot at the U.S. Capitol. Twitter said it would permanently ban Mr Trump's account from its platform, citing the risk of him using the site to incite further violence. Mr Trump was later impeached for inciting the attack but acquitted when only seven Republican senators voted to convict. On Sunday, Jason Miller,

Mr Trump's senior adviser, told Fox News Sunday that Mr Trump would be "returning to social media in probably about two or three months here, with his own platform." "I think this will be the hottest ticket in social media," Mr Miller said. "It's going to completely redefine the game, and everybody is going to be waiting and watching to see what exactly President Trump does, but it will be his own platform." Mr Miller declined to provide further details on the nature of the platform but said "there have been a lot of high-powered meetings at Mar-a-Lago" with "numerous companies," approaching the former president.

EU imposes sanctions in response to Myanmar coup

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Berlin, Mar 22 : German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said the EU could not avoid imposing sanctions on individuals responsible for violence in Myanmar. He said the number of "murders" in the country has "reached an unbearable extent." People transport a person who was shot during a security force crackdown on anti-coup protesters in Thingangyun, Yangon. An estimated 250 anti-coup protesters have been killed so far in Myanmar. The European Union approved sanctions against individuals tied to the Myanmar coup on Monday, at a meeting of EU

foreign ministers in Brussels. The sanctions mark the most significant EU response so far to the coup. At least 250 people have been killed so far in violent crackdowns on the ongoing anti-junta protests. Among those sanctioned was junta chief Min Aung Hlaing, who has been slapped with an assets freeze and visa ban blacklist. "Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing has been directly involved in and responsible for decision making concerning state functions and is therefore responsible for undermining democracy and the rule of law," the bloc's official journal said. Eleven



individuals in all were targeted. German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said Monday that the EU intended to only target individuals

who were responsible for violence in Myanmar. "The number of murders has reached an unbearable extent, which is why we will not be able to avoid

imposing sanctions," Maas told reporters as he arrived in Brussels. "We don't intend to punish the people of Myanmar but those who blatantly violate human rights," he said. "We are still pushing to stay in dialogue for a peaceful solution," he added. UN rapporteur Tom Andrews had urged the international community to cut the coup leaders' access to resources and called for sanctions in response to their "ruthless" attacks on people. "The world must respond by cutting their access to money and weapons," he tweeted. UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres also

condemned the military's continuing violent crackdown. A "firm, unified international response" is urgently needed, he said, according to his spokesman. Parts of the military's conglomerates, Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited (MEHL) and Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC), were expected to be targeted in coming weeks. These kind of measures targeting Myanmar's conglomerates, which range from mining to manufacturing, would block EU investors and banks from conducting business. The EU has had an arms embargo on Myanmar since 2018, and has already

targeted several senior army officials with sanctions. Outside of Myanmar, the EU ministers are also expected to endorse sanctions against various individuals and entities for human rights atrocities. Under consideration are sanctions against four individuals and one entity from China for their involvement in human rights abuses of the Uighur Muslim population in Xinjiang province. The EU is also on course to sanction several individuals and entities from North Korea, Russia, Libya, Eritrea and South Sudan over human rights abuses, according to diplomatic sources.