

News in brief

Indonesian navy denies it requested payments to release ships

◆ The Indonesian navy hasn't



requested or received money to release detained vessels or ship captains, a senior naval officer said, responding to a Reuters report quoting captains saying they were held by the navy in an extortion scheme. Dozens of ships have been arrested by the Indonesian navy over the last year for illegally anchoring in its waters just east of Singapore based on information from a dozen people involved in the cases, including captains, ship owners, intermediaries and insurers. Most of the captains were freed after a few weeks once ship owners made unofficial payments to navy intermediaries of between \$300,000 and \$400,000, the people said.

◆ Seven bodies have been found

Seven bodies found on Vietnam beach a week after Cambodia boat sinking



washed ashore on a beach in southern Vietnam, authorities said yesterday, a week after a boat with more than 40 people on board sank off the neighbouring Cambodian coastal town of Sihanoukville. The bodies found on a beach on Phu Quoc Island, which straddles the border area between the countries, Vietnam's Ministry of Public Security said in a news release. Two of the bodies were carrying Chinese papers in their pockets, it said.

Fire in Paraguay elections office destroys thousands of vote machines

◆ A fire broke out Thursday at Paraguay's Superior



Court of Elections, destroying thousands of electronic ballot boxes and other equipment only two months ahead of the South American country's presidential primaries, officials said. "So far we have lost 8,500 electoral machines,

notebooks, electoral material, but we guarantee citizens that the December elections will take place as planned," Jamie Bestard, the judicial body's president, said from outside the burned building in Asuncion. Two court officials, who are missing, are being sought by authorities, national police chief Gilberto Fleitas said. More than 300 firefighters were deployed to the scene to fight the flames, which were brought under control after six hours.

◆ Thailand's Constitutional Court yesterday ruled Prime

Thai court rules Prayuth has not exceeded 8-year limit as PM



Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha had not exceeded the maximum eight years allowed in the post, paving the way for his likely return from a five-week suspension. The court was announcing its decision in a case filed by the opposition, which sought clarity on whether Prayuth's time as leader of a military government formed after a coup eight years ago should count in his overall tally.

Modi launches India-made high speed train in modernisation drive

Reuters | London

Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday launched a third Indian-made high speed train in his home state of Gujarat, as a part of plans to modernise the country's rail network.

New Delhi plans to launch 75 of the Vande Bharat Express trains by August 2023 to connect all major industrial and business cities. The trains have a top speed of 160 kilometres per hour (kmh) (99 miles per hour).

The average speed of Indian trains has remained around 50 kmh, and of freight trains around 25 kmh, hitting the state-owned railways' earnings, according to a national auditor's report in April.

The 16-coach Vande Express, with a capacity of 1,128 passengers, will provide a better experience for travellers even compared to flying, Modi said after the launch.

The latest train - with updated passenger facilities compared with the previous two launches - will connect India's financial capital Mumbai with Gandhinagar, the capital of Gujarat state, a senior railways official said.

Pathik Patwari, President of the Gujarat Chamber of Commerce and Industry, welcomed the launch. "Many businessmen who do not travel much



Narendra Modi flags off new Vande Bharat Express

BETTER YOU KNOW

The weight of the latest train has been reduced by 38 tonnes from earlier versions to 392 tonnes, ensuring a more comfortable ride, and it can continue functioning even in two feet water

on trains due to long travel time will start travelling on the train now," he said. The weight of the latest train

has been reduced by 38 tonnes from earlier versions to 392 tonnes, ensuring a more comfortable ride, and it can continue functioning even in two feet water, officials said.

A spokesperson for Integrated Coach Factory, Chennai, which manufactured the train, told Reuters it was fully designed in India, with 80% local materials, and would cost about 11 billion rupees (\$135 million).

He said the state-run factory aimed to produce at least 27 by March 2023, besides high-speed freight trains soon.

Indian Railways, which posted a fall in passenger earnings during two years of the pandemic, is on a path to recovery, with total revenues up 37% year-on-year to 964.3 billion rupees (\$11.82 billion) in April-August.

More gunfire in Burkina Faso capital after junta leader urges calm

Reuters | Ouagadougou

More gunshots rang out near Burkina Faso's presidential palace yesterday afternoon, shortly after its military leader sought to quell fears of a second coup in eight months.

Residents of the capital Ouagadougou woke to the sound of gunfire at dawn yesterday. Soon after, soldiers and military vehicles took to the deserted streets, cutting off access to administrative buildings.

By mid-morning, the city, usually buzzing with motorbikes and cars, was quiet. Schools, businesses and banks were shut. State television stopped broadcasting.

But heavy gunfire broke out again near the presidential palace in the early afternoon, two Reuters reporters said.

It was not clear if a coup was underway, but security sources say there has been frustration within the military at a lack of progress in combating Islamist militants.

Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, who took power in a coup in January, urged calm in a statement. Certain members of the armed forces overcome by "moods swings" had created a "confused situation," he said.

His whereabouts are unknown.

"Since he [Damiba] took power, our soldiers die often and this does not sadden him," said Marcelin Ouedraogo, who joined a protest in the city centre yesterday calling for the end



Soldiers block the road to stop the advance of protesters against junta leader Paul-Henri Damiba

YOU KNOW WHAT

Yesterday's developments felt all too familiar in West Africa, where a coup in Mali in August 2020 set off a series of military power grabs in the region

of French military involvement in Burkina Faso, and for collaboration with Russia.

The latest unrest bore the hallmarks of other power grabs that have swept across West and Central Africa since 2020, undoing years of democratic progress.

The coups have been driven in part by violence committed

by Islamist groups who have taken over large areas of northern Burkina Faso and parts of neighbouring Mali and Niger.

Civilian populations have cheered military juntas in the hope that they would be more successful at containing the insurgents than their democratically-elected predecessors.

As well as Burkina Faso, Mali, Chad, and Guinea have all seen coups since 2020.

Yesterday's unrest is a "damning indictment for the state of democracy in the region", said Eric Humphery-Smith, Senior Africa Analyst at risk intelligence company Verisk Maplecroft. Another coup would mark the "sixth unconstitutional takeover in the Sahel in the past two years," he said.

Damiba's takeover was largely celebrated by Burkinabe fed up with the inability of former President Roch Kabore's government to rein in militants linked to Islamic State and al Qaeda.

Hurricane

Florida hurricane dead

● Hurricane expected to bring life-threatening flooding, storm surges and winds to South Carolina

Reuters | Washington

Resurgent Hurricane Ian barreled toward South Carolina yesterday, a day after carving a path of destruction across the Florida peninsula, washing away houses, causing a causeway to collapse and stranding thousands along the state's Gulf Coast.

The hurricane led to at least 21 confirmed or unconfirmed deaths in Florida, Kevin Guthrie, director of the state's Division of Emergency Management, said at a morning briefing. It was the first time a state official offered an estimate of the human toll.

Ian, which had weakened to a tropical storm during its march across Florida, was upgraded to a Category 1 hurricane on Thursday as it churned toward South Carolina with maximum sustained wind speeds of 85 mph (140 kph), the US National Hurricane Center (NHC) said.

The hurricane was forecast to hit north of low-lying Charleston at about 2 pm ET (1800 GMT) yesterday, bringing potentially life-threatening flooding, storm surges and winds. Hundreds of

Kabul suicide blast

Reuters | Kabul

A suicide bomb attack on a classroom of hundreds of people preparing for exams in the Afghan capital yesterday killed at least 19 people, with most of the casualties girls, police and a witness said.

The blast ripped through Kaaj Higher Educational Center, which coaches mainly adult men and women ahead of university entrance tests.

"We were around 600 in the class. But most of the casualties are among the girls," Akbar, a student who was wounded in the attack, told AFP from a nearby hospital.

The attack happened in the Dasht-e-Barchi neighbourhood of western Kabul, a predominantly Shiite Muslim area home to the minority Hazara community, the target of some of Afghanistan's most deadly attacks.

"Students were preparing for an exam when a suicide bomber struck at this educational centre. Unfortunately, 19 people have been martyred and 27 others wounded," Kabul police spokesman Khalid Zadran said.

Families rushed to area hospitals, where ambulances were arriving with victims and lists of those confirmed dead and wounded were posted on the walls.

"We didn't find her here," a distressed woman looking for her sister at one of the hospitals told AFP. "She was 19 years old."

"We are calling her but she's not

COVID-19: Countries worst affected

| Country | Total cases | Total deaths |
|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| 1 USA | 98,166,904 | 1,084,282 |
| 2 India | 44,587,307 | 528,629 |
| 3 France | 35,391,211 | 155,112 |
| 4 Brazil | 34,706,757 | 686,027 |
| 5 Germany | 33,312,373 | 149,948 |
| 6 S. Korea | 24,769,101 | 28,406 |
| 7 UK | 23,621,952 | 189,919 |
| 8 Italy | 22,467,278 | 177,092 |
| 9 Japan | 21,265,862 | 44,789 |
| 10 Russia | 20,985,756 | 387,269 |
| 11 Turkey | 16,873,793 | 101,139 |
| 12 Spain | 13,412,263 | 114,084 |
| 13 Vietnam | 11,479,356 | 43,148 |
| 14 Australia | 10,239,574 | 15,207 |

Global tally
622,681,746
Deaths
6,547,915
Recovered:
602,494,535
New cases
+295,516
New deaths
+629

Middle East

Figures as of closing

| Country | Total cases | new cases | Total deaths | New Deaths | Total recovered | Active cases |
|--------------|-------------|-----------|--------------|------------|-----------------|--------------|
| Egypt | 515,645 | | 24,613 | | 442,182 | 48,850 |
| Saudi Arabia | 816,498 | +109 | 9,352 | +1 | 803,623 | 3,523 |
| UAE | 1,027,502 | +471 | 2,345 | | 1,006,731 | 18,426 |
| Kuwait | 658,520 | | 2,563 | | 655,316 | 641 |
| Oman | 397,993 | | 4,260 | | 384,669 | 9,064 |
| Qatar | 451,168 | +720 | 682 | | 444,174 | 6,312 |