

News in brief

Belarus leader hails China ties ahead of Xi meeting

◆ Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko yesterday



hailed his country's ties with Beijing ahead of a closely watched meeting with his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping. The state visit to the Chinese capital by Lukashenko -- a staunch ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin -- comes after Beijing laid out a position of ostensible neutrality on the year-long war in Ukraine. China has been criticised by Western countries for failing to condemn Moscow's invasion of its European neighbour, and has reacted furiously to recent claims by the United States and NATO that it may be contemplating arms transfers to Russia.

◆ UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres was in Iraq yesterday for talks with senior officials in a show of "solidarity" after a drawn-out political crisis.

The UN chief's visit, his first to Iraq in six years, comes as the war-torn country prepares to mark the 20th anniversary of the toppling of longtime dictator Saddam Hussein in a US-led invasion. Guterres said he wanted to demonstrate "solidarity with the people and the democratic institutions of Iraq and a solidarity that means that the United Nations is totally committed to support the consolidation of the institutions in this country".

UN chief on 'solidarity' visit to Iraq



◆ Mexican troops probed over killing of five civilians



◆ The Mexican attorney general's office has opened an investigation into the deaths of five men, including a US citizen, who were allegedly killed by soldiers near the US border, authorities said. The defence ministry said in a statement it was working with investigators to clarify the events that occurred early Sunday in the border city of Nuevo Laredo. According to a complaint from the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH), the young men were traveling in a van after leaving a nightclub when they were shot by soldiers. For its part, the defence ministry said the soldiers were carrying out a routine patrol when they heard gunshots. The van accelerated as the soldiers approached, the army statement added.

CURIOSER & CURIOSER

Airline websites swamped as Hong Kong ticket giveaway takes off



Cathay Pacific airplanes are pictured at the Hong Kong International Airport
AFP | Hong Kong

People hoping to take advantage of a Hong Kong scheme to give away half a million free airline tickets faced hours-long online queues yesterday, as the Asian financial hub bids to woo tourists back.

The city last month launched a campaign to reboot its reputation as "Asia's world city", after years of strict pandemic-related travel restrictions and a crackdown on sometimes violent pro-democracy protests.

Yesterday, Hong Kong became one of the last places in the world to drop its outdoor mask mandate, which city leader John Lee said was a sign that it was "resuming normalcy".

Tourism once comprised nearly five percent of the city's economy, but visitor figures plunged last year to 600,000 -- less than one percent of 2018 levels.

Hong Kong-based carriers Cathay Pacific and Hong Kong Airlines were the first companies to launch the government-backed "Hello,



Hong Kong once had one of the globe's busiest and best-connected airports, but travel came to a virtual standstill when the city imposed strict travel restrictions and quarantine requirements as part of China's zero-Covid doctrine

Hong Kong" ticket giveaway, which will roll out over several months.

Social media users complained of long online queues to register, and an AFP reporter encountered wait times of more than two hours on the Cathay Pacific website. More than 55,000 users were waiting to access the offer, according to the reporter.

US's Blinken says no plans to meet Russia, China at G20

AFP | New Delhi

Top US diplomat Antony Blinken said yesterday he had no plans to meet his Russian or Chinese counterparts at a G20 foreign ministers' meeting, as Ukraine and China tensions overshadow attempts by host India to forge unity among the world's biggest economies.

The gathering in New Delhi on Thursday will be the first time US Secretary of State Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov have been in the same room since a G20 meeting in Bali last July.

"If Russia... were genuinely prepared to engage in meaningful diplomacy necessary to end the aggression, of course we'd be the first to work to engage, but there's zero evidence of that," Blinken told reporters ahead of his arrival yesterday in Delhi.

A meeting of G20 finance ministers in Bengaluru last week failed to agree on a common statement after Beijing and Moscow sought to water down language on Russia's war with Ukraine.

But Washington was optimistic this week's summit would produce a declaration reflecting "the majority, if not the overwhelming majority of the G20 continuing to stand against Russia's war", a senior State Department official said.

Lavrov arrived late Tuesday in India -- which has not condemned the war -- and will use



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken speaks during a press conference



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ANTONY BLINKEN

his G20 attendance to lay into Western countries, according to the Russian foreign ministry.

The West wants to "take revenge for the inevitable disappearance of the levers of dominance from its hands", the ministry's English-language statement said.

"The destructive policy of the US and its allies has already put the world on the brink of a disaster," it added.

The US secretary of state also

said he had no plans to meet Chinese foreign minister Qin Gang on the sidelines of the of the two-day G20 gathering.

Blinken had a fiery encounter with top Chinese diplomat Wang Yi last month in Germany after the United States shot down a suspected Chinese spy balloon over its east coast on February 4.

The incident led Blinken to nix a rare trip to China, slamming the "unacceptable violation of US sovereignty and international law" which "must never again occur", the State Department said.

Beijing, which has also been angered by Washington's stance on Taiwan, denies it uses spy balloons and says the craft was for weather research.

Wang "urged the US side to change course, acknowledge and repair the damage that its excessive use of force caused to China-US relations", state news agency Xinhua reported.

China says 'lab leak' claims hurt US credibility

AFP | Beijing

Beijing accused Washington yesterday of harming its own credibility after a top US intelligence official said his agency believed the pandemic "most likely" caused by a laboratory incident in Wuhan, China.

FBI Director Christopher Wray told Fox News on Tuesday that the Bureau has now assessed the source of Covid-19 was "most likely a potential lab incident in Wuhan."

Chinese officials have angrily denied the claim, calling it a

smear campaign against Beijing.

"The United States once again stirs up the laboratory leak theory, which will not discredit China, which will further lower its own credibility," foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning told a regular briefing yesterday.

Wray's comments come after a report earlier this week said the US Department of Energy had determined that a leak from a Chinese lab was the most likely cause of the Covid-19 outbreak.



A laboratory technician processes samples from people to be tested for coronavirus in Wuhan, China (file photo)

Pope scraps free flats for cardinals

AFP | Vatican City

Catholic cardinals will no longer enjoy free Vatican apartments under a rule change ordered by Pope Francis to save money, Vatican News reported on Wednesday.

The pontiff said the current economic climate required "sacrifice" as he also ordered an end to discounted rents enjoyed by top Vatican officials.

The decision was taken "to meet the growing commitments" of the Catholic Church "in an economic context of particular gravity, such as the current one", according to a papal note cited by the Vatican's official news outlet.



Pope Francis waves from the window of the apostolic palace

Francis urged the need "for everyone to make an extraordinary sacrifice to allocate more resources to the mission of the Holy See, also by increasing revenue from the management

of the real estate patrimony".

The Vatican did not publish the note, nor did it respond to AFP requests for confirmation.

Existing rental contracts will be honoured but from then on the Church institutions that own the properties must apply the same rates as those charged to people with no connection to the Vatican, Vatican News said.

It did not say when the measure would come into effect, only that it was agreed after a meeting the pope had with the head of the Vatican's economy department on February 13.

The Vatican's real estate empire is vast, including buildings from Rome to Paris, London and Geneva.

Head-o

Greek transport minis

● Rescue effort under way after passenger train carrying 350 people collided with a cargo train

● Station master arrested

AFP | Athens

A head-on collision between two trains in Greece killed 36 people, with many more still missing yesterday after the accident on a route plagued by years of safety warnings.

In Greece's worst train tragedy in decades, two carriages were crushed and a third engulfed in fire when a passenger train and freight train collided in the central city of Larissa.

At least 85 people were injured in the accident, which left a tangled mess of metal and shattered glass in a field. Six of them are in intensive care.

"I've never seen anything like this in my entire life," said one rescue worker, emerging from the wreckage. "It's tragic. Five hours later, we are finding bodies."

In some cases, passengers are being identified from body parts, volunteer fireman Vassilis Iliopoulos told Skai TV, warning that the death toll would rise.

Erdogan says ele May 14 despite T



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan stands with officials in the hard-hit southeastern province of Hatay (file photo)
AFP | Istanbul

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday ruled out any delay in elections after the devastating quake that killed tens of thousands in Turkey, saying the vote would push ahead on May 14 as planned.

After the massive 7.8-magnitude quake that killed more than 45,000 people in Turkey, speculation mounted on whether the polls -- which could keep Erdogan's Islamic-rooted government in power until 2028 -- would be able to proceed.

Last month, Erdogan declared a three-month state of emergency across 11 quake-hit provinces, and the region is still suffering from strong tremors that make the likelihood of campaigning in the area extremely unlikely.

But Erdogan told his ruling party lawmakers in the Ankara parliament that "(Turkish) people will