

News in brief

◆ **The first head of state of an independent Belarus, Stanislav Shushkevich, who with the leaders of Russia and Ukraine signed a decree dissolving the Soviet Union, has died aged 87, his wife told AFP.** Shushkevich, who later became a critic of Belarus's strongman leader Alexander Lukashenko, died of complications from coronavirus, his wife Irina said yesterday. As chairman of the Belarus Supreme Soviet, Shushkevich, along with Russian leader Boris Yeltsin and Ukrainian leader Leonid Kravchuk, signed the 1991 declaration that dissolved the Soviet Union. Shushkevich led Belarus from independence until he was defeated in a 1994 election by Lukashenko, becoming a prominent member of the opposition.



Ex-Belarus leader Stanislav Shushkevich, who helped dissolve USSR, dies at 87

◆ **Myanmar junta court rejects Suu Kyi corruption appeal**



◆ **A Myanmar junta court yesterday rejected an appeal by ousted leader Aung San Suu Kyi against a five-year sentence for corruption handed down**

last week, according to a source with knowledge of the case. Since a coup ousted her government in February last year, plunging Myanmar into upheaval, Suu Kyi has been in military custody and faces a raft of charges that could jail her for more than 150 years. Last week the Nobel laureate was convicted of accepting a bribe of \$600,000 cash and gold bars -- a charge she said was "absurd", according to her lawyer. An appeal filed by Suu Kyi's legal team was on Wednesday "summarily dismissed without hearing from either side", the source said. The 76-year-old Suu Kyi had already been sentenced to six years in jail for incitement against the military, breaching Covid-19 rules and breaking a telecommunications law.

◆ **The number of people facing hunger rose to 193 million last year as conflict, climate change and economic crises ravaged people's livelihoods, the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization said Wednesday.** While experts have warned that Russia's war in Ukraine could cause famine, the FAO said in an annual report that nearly 40 million more people were pushed into "acute food insecurity" in 2021. Among 53 countries facing the problem, the most affected include the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Yemen and Afghanistan where millions face hunger after the country plunged into financial crisis following the Taliban takeover in 2021. The United Nations defines "acute food insecurity" as when a person's inability to consume adequate food puts their lives or livelihoods in immediate danger. "This is hunger that threatens to slide into famine and cause widespread death," the FAO said. The number has risen constantly since the first report was published by the FAO, the World Food Programme and the European Union in 2016.

40 million more faced acute hunger in 2021: UN



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COVID-19 Countries worst affected

Country	Total cases	Total deaths	Global tally
1 USA	83,240,101	1,021,581	514,763,538
2 India	43,088,401	523,920	
3 Brazil	30,482,429	663,765	Deaths
4 France	28,757,765	146,262	
5 Germany	24,949,403	136,183	6,266,199
6 UK	22,073,858	175,319	
7 Russia	18,206,167	376,421	Recovered:
8 S. Korea	17,395,791	23,079	
9 Italy	16,586,268	163,889	469,501,523
10 Turkey	15,036,110	98,801	
11 Spain	11,953,481	104,668	New cases
12 Vietnam	10,662,446	43,047	
13 Argentina	9,083,673	128,653	+195,880
14 Netherlands	8,054,728	22,266	
			New deaths
			+568

Middle East

Country	Total cases	new cases	Total deaths	New Deaths	Total recovered	Active cases
Egypt	515,645		24,613		442,182	48,850
Saudi Arabia	754,464	+124	9,094	+1	742,127	3,243
UAE	899,441	+199	2,302		883,160	13,979
Kuwait	631,409		2,555		628,090	764
Oman	389,126		4,258		384,243	625
Qatar	364,778		677		363,573	528

Figures as of closing

Kremlin dismisses speculation to declare war on Ukraine on M

● **Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said: "There is no chance of that. It's nonsense."**

● **Peskov also said that people should not listen to speculation**

Reuters | London

The Kremlin yesterday dismissed speculation that President Vladimir Putin planned to declare war against Ukraine and declare a national mobilisation on May 9 when Russia commemorates the Soviet Union's victory in World War Two. Putin has so far characterised Russia's actions in Ukraine as a "special military operation", not a war. But Western politicians and some Russia watchers have speculated that he could be pre-



Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov

paring for a major announcement next Monday with a range of possible scenarios ranging from an outright declaration of war to a declaration of victory. Asked about speculation that Putin will declare war against

a national mobilisation. "It is not true. It is nonsense," Peskov told reporters. The May 9 Victory Day is one of Russia's most important national events - a remembrance of the enormous Soviet sacrifice made in defeating Nazi Germany in what is known in Russia as the Great Patriotic War. An estimated 27 million Soviet citizens were killed in the 1941-45 war which left the Soviet Union devastated and almost every Soviet family mourning. Russia's Feb. 24 invasion of Ukraine has killed thousands of people, displaced millions more and raised fears of the most serious confrontation between Russia and the United States since the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. Putin says the "special military operation" in Ukraine is necessary because the United States was using Ukraine to threaten Russia and Moscow had to defend against the persecution of

EU targets Russian oil, banks as Ukraine say

● **EU proposes toughest sanctions yet on Russia**

● **Ukraine keeps wary eye on Belarusian army drills**

● **Russia says NATO arms supplies to Ukraine are target**

● **More evacuees leave on buses from Mariupol**

Reuters | Kyiv/Brussels

The EU proposed its toughest sanctions yet against Russia yesterday, including a phased oil embargo, as Kyiv said Moscow was intensifying its offensive in



India releases 2020 death data ahead of WHO COVID mortality study it objects

Reuters | New Delhi

India registered about 1.475 million more total deaths in 2020 than the previous year, government data released months ahead of schedule on Tuesday showed, as the World Health Organization readies its estimates of excess COVID-19 deaths whose methodology New Delhi has opposed.

Vinod Kumar Paul, a top health official who has overseen India's fight against the pandemic, said there was nothing "dramatic" in the total death data for 2020 and that those were "absolute, correct and counted numbers".

He said the data showing 8.1 million total deaths in India in 2020 was released by the

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Countries around the world reported only 1.83 million COVID-19 deaths in 2020 but the WHO estimates excess mortality of at least 3 million globally for that year.

Office of the Registrar General two to three months in advance because of the attention on the country's COVID toll.

"There is a public narrative in the media, based on various modelling estimates, that India's COVID-19 deaths are many times the reported figure - that's not the case in reality,"

he told state TV.

"We now have actual data for 2020, there is no need to do any modelling now. We will have actual, robust data for 2021 too. Modelling can lead to overestimation, absurd estimation."

The death count grew slower in the country of 1.35 billion people in 2020 than in the previous two years, the data showed.

India officially reported 148,738 COVID-19 deaths in 2020, with the tally jumping to 523,889 on Tuesday out of more than 43 million cumulative infections. Only the United States and Brazil have recorded more deaths as of Tuesday.

India has said it does not agree with the WHO's methodology.

Vatican prepares

Reuters | Vatican City

The new barracks of the Vatican Swiss guards will be built to accommodate female members if Pope Francis or his successors allow women to join the elite and colourfully dressed force.

Officials of the Swiss foundation that is raising the estimated 45 million Swiss Francs (\$46 million) to replace the current 150-year-old barracks signed a memorandum of understanding with the Vatican's Secretary of State on Wednesday.

"The project includes single rooms with private bathrooms," Riccardo Boscardin, an executive of the foundation, said in the courtyard of the barracks after the signing. "There are two reasons. One is because COVID hit when the project started and the second is the possibility of integrating