

News in brief

Thailand defends divisive Myanmar junta talks

◆ Thailand yesterday defended hosting talks with the Myanmar

junta that have split the regional bloc leading diplomatic efforts to end the chaos engulfing the country since the military seized power. Myanmar has been in turmoil since a February 2021 coup that ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi, with more than 3,600 civilians killed in the military's crackdown on dissent, according to a monitoring group. The generals have been barred from high-level meetings of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) regional bloc, of which Myanmar is a member. But Thailand's caretaker government, which is dominated by army-linked parties, last week invited junta foreign minister Than Shwe to the informal two-day meeting.

◆ The UN's top expert on rights in

Afghanistan's 'gender apartheid' should be international crime: UN expert

Afghanistan urged countries yesterday to consider making "gender apartheid" an international crime, helping hold the Taliban accountable for its grave and systematic abuses against Afghan women. Since ousting a foreign-backed government in August 2021, the Taliban authorities have imposed an austere sharia law, barring girls from secondary school, pushing women out of many government jobs, preventing them from travelling without a male relative and ordering them to cover up outside the home. "It is imperative that we do not look away," Richard Bennett told the UN Human Rights Council.



◆ An attacker fatally stabbed a security guard yesterday outside Brazil's

Guard fatally stabbed outside Brazil embassy in Tunisia

embassy in Tunisia before being shot and arrested, the Tunisian Interior Ministry said. The guard "was wounded by a sharp object" wielded "by a person he was questioning over the reason for his presence in the perimeter of the embassy," the ministry said in a statement. He died at a hospital shortly after, interior ministry spokesman Faker Bouzghaya said.



CURIOSER & CURIOSER

Elusive megalodon sharks officially declared extinct by scientists



A life size replica of the Megalodon Shark moves across a screen at the Natural History Museum in Los Angeles, California

TDT | Agencies

Despite persistent rumors, scientists have definitively refuted the notion that megalodon sharks still roam Earth's oceans today.

The megalodon, an enormous species of shark that dominated the seas from 20 million to 3.6 million years ago, is extinct and has left no credible evidence to support its survival into modern times.

Jack Cooper, a doctoral student at Swansea University and member of the Pimiento Research Group studying marine diversity, has categorically dismissed the notion of megalodon's existence today. He has explained that there is no shred of credible evidence to support the claim and referred to it as "complete nonsense."

The extinction of the megalodon led to cascading consequences, influencing the evolution of marine mammals, including whales, which grew larger in the absence of the apex predator. While some of Earth's oceans remain unexplored, including the mysterious and deep Mariana Trench, scientists argue that such inhospitable environments are unlikely habitats for a large apex predator like the megalodon.

Moreover, the Mariana Trench primarily hosts microscopic life, incapable of sustaining even a single megalodon, let alone a hidden population.



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Xi says China, US 'made progress'

Xi Jinping and Antony Blinken agree to

● Meeting between China's president and US secretary of state takes place at time of heightened tension

AFP | Washington

President Xi Jinping said China had "made progress" with the United States yesterday as he hosted Secretary of State Antony Blinken for talks in Beijing.

Blinken's visit is the highest-level trip by a US official to China in nearly five years with ties severely strained between the world's two largest economies.

Speaking following his meeting with Xi, the top US diplomat said he agreed with China's leadership on the need to "stabilise" relations but that he was "clear-eyed" on vast disagreements between



China's President Xi Jinping (R) receives US Secretary of State Antony Blinken prior to their meeting

the two countries.

"Direct engagement and sustained communication at senior levels is the best way to responsibly manage differences and ensure that competition does not veer into conflict," Blinken told reporters.

"I heard the same from my Chinese counterparts. We both agree on the need to stabilise our relationship," he added.

Xi, China's most powerful leader in decades, met Blinken at the capital's Great Hall of the People, Chinese state media and US offi-

cialists said.

"The Chinese side has made our position clear and the two sides have agreed to follow through the common understandings President Biden and I had reached in Bali," Xi told the top US diplomat.

"Two sides have also made progress and reached agreement on some specific issues," he added, without elaborating.

"I hope that Secretary Blinken, through this visit, can make positive contributions to stabilising China-US relations."

The meeting, which lasted just over half an hour, came after Blinken held more than 10 hours of talks over two days with other top officials.

At the ornate Diaoyutai State Guesthouse earlier yesterday, Blinken and China's foreign policy supremo Wang Yi offered polite smiles before talks with their aides, who unlike their bosses wore masks in line with lingering Covid-19 protocols.

Jailed Kremlin critic Navalny goes on trial on 'extremism' charges

AFP | Moscow

Jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny went on trial yesterday on "extremism" charges that could see his prison time extended for decades as part of wider government efforts to silence dissent.

The case comes more than a year into Russia's full-scale offensive in Ukraine, which ushered in a new wave of legal proceedings against Moscow's critics, with many now in exile or in jail.

An AFP journalist at the maximum security IK-6 penal colony 250 kilometres (155 miles) east of Moscow where the 47-year-old veteran opponent of Russian President Vladimir Putin is being held, reported that proceedings were underway.

Navalny once mobilised massive anti-Kremlin protests but is now serving a nine-year prison sentence on embezzlement



Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny (2nd L) is seen on a screen during court hearings

charges that his supporters see as punishment for his political work.

He was arrested in 2021 on his arrival in Moscow from Germany, where he had been recovering from a poisoning attack that he blamed on the Kremlin.

Navalny, who has experienced

major weight loss in prison, now faces up to another 30 years behind bars.

Navalny said that prosecutors had provided him with 3,828 pages describing all the crimes he is alleged to have committed while in prison.

"Although it's clear from the

size of the tomes that I am a sophisticated and persistent criminal, it's impossible to find out what exactly I am accused of," Navalny quipped.

He has been charged with financing extremist activity, publicly inciting extremist activities and "rehabilitating the Nazi ideology," among other offences.

While he has been the target of multiple legal cases, this is the first formally political case against him, his team said.

"He is being tried for his political work," Navalny's spokeswoman Kira Yarmysh said.

In April, Navalny said he was told he would be judged by a military tribunal over "terrorism" charges. He could face life in prison, he said.

Navalny's team says he has been harassed in prison, where he was kept in a "punishment cell" for perceived transgressions.

\$1.5 bn pledged to curb Sudan's slide into 'death and destruction': UN

AFP | Geneva

Donors at a UN conference yesterday pledged close to \$1.5 billion to combat the humanitarian crisis in Sudan and help its neighbours host refugees fleeing the fighting.

Sudan is descending into death and destruction at an unprecedented speed, UN chief Antonio Guterres said as he urged donors to step in and curb the unfolding catastrophe.

The conference comes midway through a three-day ceasefire which appeared to have brought calm to the capital Khartoum, after the failure of earlier truces to ensure secure aid corridors.

"Today, donors have announced close to \$1.5 billion for the humanitarian response to Sudan and the region," the UN's humanitarian chief Martin Griffiths said, closing the hybrid



A man walks on a street in Khartoum

pledging conference hosted in Geneva.

"This crisis will require sustained financial support and I hope that we can all keep Sudan at the top of our priorities."

UN refugees chief Filippo Grandi added: "It is very important that now these contributions be clearly allocated and disbursed as quickly as possible

because we're really short of funds in this particular emergency."

More than two months into the fighting, the United Nations is worried that the crisis could spill over and destabilise neighbouring African states.

"The scale and speed of Sudan's descent into death and destruction is unprecedented,"

"This crisis will require sustained financial support and I hope that we can all keep Sudan at the top of our priorities"

UN'S HUMANITARIAN CHIEF MARTIN GRIFFITHS

UN Secretary-General Guterres told the conference.

"Without strong international support, Sudan could quickly become a locus of lawlessness, radiating insecurity across the region."

Since April 15, the army, led by Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, has been battling the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) commanded by his former deputy Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, after the two fell out in a power struggle.