

## International

# US issues Hong Kong 'travel alert' over COVID rules, child separations

## Chinese city imposes controversial coronavirus isolation policies

**HONG KONG:** The United States warned citizens against travelling to Hong Kong yesterday, citing the risk of children being separated from parents as the Chinese city imposes controversial coronavirus isolation policies. The State Department upgraded Hong Kong to its highest "Do Not Travel" warning "due to COVID-19 related restrictions, including the risk of parents and children being separated".



### 'Do Not Travel' warning alert

"In some cases, children in Hong Kong who test positive have been separated from their parents and kept in isolation until they meet local hospital discharge requirements," the State Department added. The Asian financial hub is in the grip of its worst coronavirus outbreak, registering tens of thousands of new cases each day, overwhelming hospitals and shattering the city's zero-COVID strategy. China has ordered local officials to stamp out the outbreak even as studies estimate as many as a quarter of the city's residents may have been infected in the current wave.

Authorities plan to test all 7.4 million residents later this month and are scrambling to build a network of isolation camps and temporary hospitals, with China's help, to house the infected. "It remains our policy objective to subject all confirmed people to isolation at places other than their places of accommodation so as not to infect others," city leader Carrie Lam wrote in a progress report this week. That has deepened anxieties about family separations in the months ahead and the warning by the United States is the first time the risk has been specifically cited in a travel advisory.

#### Spiraling infections

More than 280,000 infections have been recorded in the past two months, compared with just 12,000 for the rest of the pandemic while Hong Kong's death rate is currently four times that of Singapore. Yesterday saw a record official tally of 55,353 cases and 117 deaths, the first time the daily fatality rate has hit three figures. The real infection rate is believed to be far higher in part because residents are worried



**HONG KONG:** Funeral home staff members (top right) load a dead body into a vehicle next to people being treated at a makeshift area outside Caritas hospital in Hong Kong.— AFP

about coming forward. For two years Hong Kong kept infections largely at bay using a strict zero-COVID strategy, but an outbreak of the highly infectious Omicron variant has torn through the city since January.

The government was caught flat-footed, with few plans in place to deal with a mass outbreak despite the two-year breathing room afforded by the initial zero-COVID success. The city has since seen overflowing hospitals and morgues, shortages of medics and ambulances, panic buying and a frantic expansion of the city's spartan quarantine camp system. The vast majority of those dying are over 70 and unvaccinated after Hong Kong failed to raise its elderly vaccination rate despite ample supplies. Yesterday, officials said some 500 bodies would need to be stored temporarily in refrigerated truck containers.

#### UK, Australia fears

Departures by foreign residents have spiked while businesses have voiced growing frustration over the city's descent into further international isolation as well as repeated government policy u-turns. The outbreak has led to the imposition of the toughest restrictions yet, with more than a dozen types of businesses ordered to close and a ban on more than two people gathering in public. Hong Kong health authori-

ties have defended the policy of separating sick children from their uninfected parents, saying that rapidly filling hospital spaces should be reserved for patients. Diplomats from Britain and Australia have previously voiced concern about separations.

The United States, Britain and Australia are on a list of nine nations currently forbidden from flying to Hong Kong until late April because of their own coronavirus infections. Details are currently scant on how this month's mass testing will work and where the infected will be housed. About 70,000 isolation units for mild cases are due to come online in the coming weeks, in requisitioned hotels, public housing units and camps. At Hong Kong's current official caseload, that would cover less than two days' worth of new infections.

Lam yesterday said there will not be enough beds to isolate all infections but did not give further details. She also said there would be no "citywide lockdown" though some measures would be in place "limiting people from going out" during testing. The government has said it is still "refining" its testing plan and has urged residents not to panic, adding food supplies remain stable. Several local health experts have publicly called for mass testing to be delayed given infections are set to peak at some 180,000 a day later this month.— AFP

## UAE is drawing global attention to the relationship between Iran and the Houthis

More than 120 countries condemned the Houthi drone and missile attacks on the UAE that took place in January and February of this year. The US has not designated the Houthi militia in Yemen as a terrorist organization, but a new resolution was introduced this week at the UN to designate the Houthis and sanction them. The Houthis meet the legal threshold for designation. The Biden administration removed the US designation on the bet that the gesture of goodwill would make the Houthis more amenable to a political settlement of the Yemen war. This bet failed and the Houthis further armed themselves with Iran's help.

Redesignation is a political question for Biden. The humanitarian aid community opposes designation because it makes it illegal to coordinate with the Houthis to deliver assistance. Designation would also make it illegal to provide arms to the Houthis. But designation does not grant the US military any new authorities. Any operation to target Houthi leaders would have to be approved by the President. The Houthis calculate that President Biden will not want to enter the war by approving direct action. Designation, therefore, would merely be a political statement supporting the UAE.

If Biden does not designate, the Houthis will be further emboldened to attack. The Emiratis will read a refusal to designate as an indicator of US apathy toward Gulf security and a betrayal of the partnership. To avoid emboldening the Houthis, or worsening the humanitarian situation, or alienating valuable partners, one option Biden has is to refrain from designation but approve frozen arms sales to the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

a desire for a new, "more inclusive" UN resolution that doesn't call out the Houthis or specify the return of the Hadi government. Russia's end state in Yemen has been to keep the US mired in a nasty internal political divide about whether to support our Gulf partners, and to ensure whatever government comes to power in Yemen is amenable to buying Russian weapons and allowing Russian use of ports and runways. But that end state was running headlong into their desire to strengthen security relationships with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, so Moscow was open to a new tack.



Even if a backchannel deal was reached between Abu Dhabi and Moscow before the Ukraine vote at the UN, it was a gamble for the UAE to trust Russia to uphold their end of the deal. This risk tolerance on the international stage illustrates the centrality of addressing the Houthi threat to Emirati interests. What is needed is a multilateral effort around ending Iran's support of militias acting against internationally recognized governments. This should not be difficult to build. World powers and nations in Iran's neighborhood are united in opposition to Iran's export of drones to groups like Hezbollah, militias in Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen.

But the question governments should be asking is: Do we address just this manifestation of the problem, or do we address the root problem itself? Iran's missile and drone programs feed not only the Houthi weapons program but also those of Hezbollah, militias in Iraq, and likely other groups in the future. The thrust of international diplomacy should be:

- 1) Make it clear to the Houthis that they will be treated as international terrorists immediately if this persists, not only by UN process, but to include options by member nations that Houthi leaders will become legitimate military objectives for kinetic and covert operations by more than Coalition forces;
- 2) Disincentive the Iranian regime's use of missiles and drones as foreign policy tools. This could mean sanctioning members of the new government in Tehran who work on these programs (applying sanctions directly to the decision-makers and not broadly to the population). It could also mean clarifying that military options to remove production facilities are on the table.

Regardless of the outcome of nuclear talks in Vienna, Iran will continue to dedicate funding to their missile and drone programs if left unaddressed, and to share the results with militias. The export of these items is central to the value proposition Iran presents to the armed groups that carry out its foreign policy around the region. In addition, Iran believes it must develop delivery systems (missiles and rockets) in parallel with their nuclear program to maintain deterrence. A nuclear program without a delivery system is science. A nuclear program plus a delivery system is a weapon of mass destruction.

An analysis piece by **Reconnaissance Research**, written by **Kirsten Fontenrose**, President, **Red Six International Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council** and **Advisor at Reconnaissance Research**



Biden may want to place a choice before his political party. Which is a higher priority: delivering aid in Yemen or blocking arms sales to the UAE? He can grant them one of the two. Those who press him to grant both should be ready to accept accountability when the inevitable happens - continued, escalated attacks by the Houthis and other Iranian proxies against US partners and US troops, and the collapse of US influence in the Gulf.

Anyone who thinks this is hyperbole need only look at the vote this week on the UN Security Council draft resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In a move that surprised Washington, the UAE abstained. The UAE expected this favor to be returned on Yemen, and it was. Russia has blocked new UN action on Yemen since at least 2018, when the UK had the pen on a new resolution that would have placed an arms embargo on the Houthi organization.

The need for action like this became even more apparent in October of 2020 when the UN arms embargo on Iran expired, enabling advancements in Iranian weapons production that benefit the Houthis. Rotating into the UN Security Council this March at the helm, the UAE is using this role to draw global attention to the relationship between Iran and the Houthis. They are calling for action with resolution 2624 and needed Russia to back it or stay out of the way.

Recently Russia has expressed

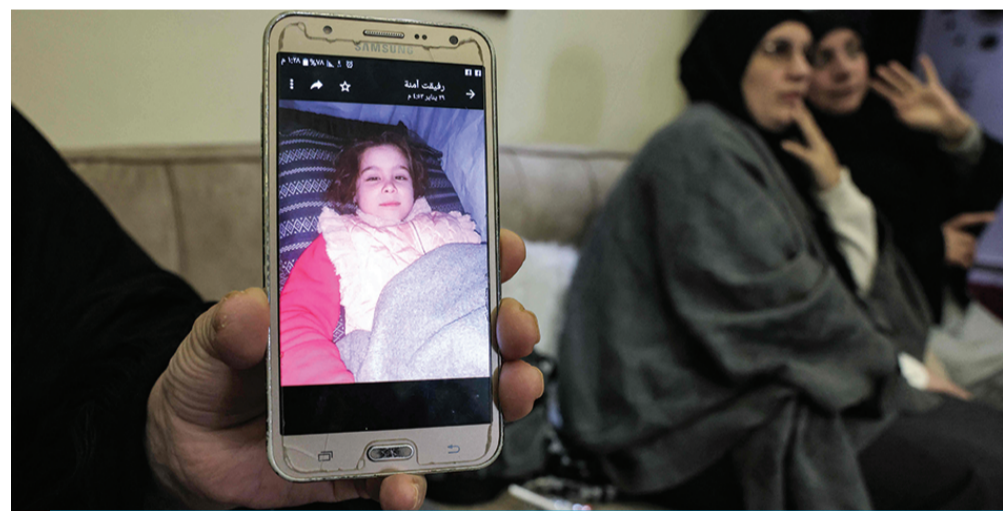
## Philippines marks 'Ash Wednesday'

**MANILA:** Thousands of Filipinos flocked to churches to observe Ash Wednesday, with Catholic priests and nuns daubing their foreheads with a cross for the first time since the start of the coronavirus pandemic. Most COVID-19 restrictions were scrapped this week after a sharp drop in infections and increased vaccinations, allowing churches to pack their pews and physical contact to resume.

Devotees wearing masks began lining up outside Baclaran Church in Manila before dawn to receive the ash cross on their foreheads—a ritual that signals the beginning of Lent. Churches have in the past two years sprinkled it in people's hair due to anti-COVID measures. "I feel like I am in heaven," Lydia Smith, 76, told AFP outside the church where several thousand of the faithful stood in long queues waiting their turn. "I am really happy even if it's very crowded. It's like the joy of the church has returned."

The Philippines is overwhelmingly Catholic, with some 80 percent of its people said to be believers. Since early 2020 most devotees have been forced to follow church services online and major religious festivals have been curtailed or cancelled due to strict social-distancing rules. But Tuesday marked the beginning of the "new normal" in the national capital region and 38 other areas. Most restrictions have been removed, allowing places of worship, restaurants and public transport to operate at full capacity.

Local church officials gave the green light for the "imposition of ashes on the forehead" to resume yesterday, but sprinkling the powdery residue in hair was still allowed. "One of the tragedies of COVID-19 is it separated us," said Father Victorino Cueto, the rector of Baclaran Church. "When we put the ash on the forehead, it means that we are really reaching out to one another, in faith and in love." Hotel safety officer Radito Mendoza, 62, welcomed the resumption of the tradition. "I'm so happy that we are slowly going back to normal and those who want to go to church are now able to do so," he said.— AFP



**TRIPOLI:** Noor Al-Huda Abbas, a 59-year-old Lebanese woman whose daughter in law and granddaughter are held at the northeast Syrian camp of Al-Hol, shows a photo of her granddaughter on a phone during an interview.— AFP

## Lebanese long for IS-linked relatives stuck in the camps

**TRIPOLI:** For three years, Umm Mohammed Iali has been longing to embrace her granddaughters stuck in Syria since her two sons died fighting for the Islamic State group there. Like thousands of other relatives of jihadist fighters, the three Lebanese girls and their mother are being indefinitely held in the northeast Syrian camp of Al-Hol. Sitting in her grandchildren's bedroom in her home in the city of Tripoli in northern Lebanon, tears stream down Umm Mohammed's face.

"I have been telling myself they will come back today, they will come back tomorrow—every day for the past three years," the 50-year-old said. "I even prepared the bedrooms for their return," she said, surrounded by heart-shaped pillows and star-speckled walls. Her oldest granddaughter is 10 and the youngest, born in Syria, is only four. The Ialis are among dozens of Lebanese families demanding Beirut repatriates their relatives stuck in overcrowded camps like Al-Hol.

Al-Hol shelters around 56,000 displaced people, including refugees from multiple nations, according to the United Nations. Most fled or surrendered during the dying days of IS's self-proclaimed "caliphate" in March 2019, and around half the camp residents are Iraqis. IS in 2014 seized large swathes of Iraq and Syria, ruling its territory brutally until its defeat by local forces backed by a US-led coalition. The IS jihadists continue to perpetrate violence in Al-Hol, and the UN has repeatedly warned of deteriorating security conditions there.

#### Living in 'misery'

Since the fall of IS, Syria's Kurds—who run a semi-autonomous administration in northeast Syria—and the UN have urged foreign countries to repatriate their jihadist-linked nationals. But this has only been done in dribs and drabs, as countries fear a backlash domestically, both in terms of the reaction of their citizens and the risk of future attacks on their soil.

Umm Mohammed's Sunni majority hometown, Tripoli, has long been a hotbed for jihadists fighting against regime forces in Syria's civil war. Hundreds of young Tripoli men have joined extremists and opposition groups there since the war began in 2011. Their wives and children often followed them. Mohammed Iali's widow Alaa, 30, is one of those women. Her husband was killed in 2019 during the battle to take IS's last bastion in Baghouz, Syria. Despite the defeat of the "caliphate" that year, the jihadists are believed to have recruited dozens of Lebanese men to join their ranks since last summer.

A security official has told AFP that "financial motives" are the main attraction for the youth of Tripoli, one of the poorest places in a country suffering a financial crisis that has left more than 80 percent of the population living in poverty. At least eight Tripoli men have been reported killed in Iraq since December. After fleeing Baghouz, Alaa was moved to a high-security annex at Al-Hol. "All I want is for this woman and her girls to come back," said Umm Mohammed, whose dream is to hold her granddaughters tightly. "I live only for them."

She told AFP that their tents in the camps fill with muddy rainwater every winter. "They live in misery, deprived of everything." Since Alaa arrived in Al-Hol her father, Khaled Androun, managed to meet with her and his granddaughters twice but could not secure their release.—AFP