

Mississippi Removes Confederate Symbol From Flag



A state flag with the Confederate standard flutters outside a building in Starkville.

WASHINGTON (AFP) -- The Republican governor of the southern U.S. state of Mississippi signed a bill Tuesday removing the Confederate battle standard from the state flag, after nationwide protests drew renewed attention to symbols of the United States' racist past.

"This is not a political moment, it is a solemn occasion to come together as a Mississippi family, reconcile, and move forward together," Governor Tate Reeves wrote on Facebook.

Mississippi is the only American state to incorporate the Confederate standard on its official flag, after nearby Georgia dropped it in 2003.

Tate said a commission on the flag would "begin the process of selecting a new one -- emblazoned with the words 'In God We Trust.'"

The swift signing comes after state lawmakers voted Sunday to remove the emblem in a 91-23 majority vote in the House of Representatives and a 37-14 vote in the Senate.

Mississippians, nearly 40 percent of whom are African American, will vote on the design in November. If they reject the new design, Mississippi will go without a state flag until a new one is approved.

"We can move on, and with God's help, we will," Tate said at the Tuesday signing.

Tate had previously stated he

would sign the bill into law, following weeks of mounting pressure.

Mississippi senator Roger Wicker hailed the signing, calling it "a historic & long-awaited day for Mississippi."

"I appreciate our state legislators for having the courage and conviction to make this necessary change to our state flag," he tweeted. "As I have maintained since 2015, Mississippians deserve a banner that unites us rather than divides us."

But Stephanie Rolph, a Mississippi historian at Millsaps College in Jackson, warned against celebrating too much.

"I want to be cautious in how much significance we attach to" removing the Confederate battle symbol, said Rolph, who is also a member of the Mississippi Historical Society.

"What I don't want to see is to see that as the end of the battle," she told AFP. "I think it should be the tipping point for an investment in the state education about the meaning of that symbol and about the various other ways that economic violence, social terrorism and other disparities have followed and really left a legacy behind the end of slavery."

Racial injustice has been the subject of a renewed and fiery national conversation in the United States since the death in May of George Floyd, an unarmed African-American man, at the hands of a white Minneapolis police officer.

China Tells West Hong Kong 'None of Your Business'



Police display a public announcement banner showing the warning to protesters in Causeway Bay before the annual handover march in Hong Kong, July 1, 2020.

BEIJING (Dispatches) -- China on Wednesday slammed West Hong Kong criticism over a new national security law for Hong Kong, saying other countries should keep quiet.

Western governments have claimed that the new law will curb the city's freedoms and undermine the "One Country, Two Systems" policy meant to protect freedoms unseen on the mainland.

But Beijing officials rebuffed the criticism of the law at a press conference.

"What's this got to do with you?" said Zhang Xiaoming of the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office of the State Council. "It's none of your business."

Officials insisted there had been wide consultation with members of Hong Kong society and hit back at criticism it was undermining Hong Kong's autonomy.

"If what we want is one country, one system, it would have been simple," Zhang said.

"We are completely able to impose the criminal law, the criminal procedure and the national security law and other national laws on Hong Kong."

"Why would we need to put so much effort into formulating a national security law tailor-made for Hong Kong?"

Zhang also insisted that the law --

which he said cannot be applied retroactively -- was only to target "a handful of criminals" and "not the entire opposition camp."

"The purpose of enacting Hong Kong's National Security Law is definitely not to target Hong Kong's opposition camp, pro-democracy camp, as the enemy," he said.

Instead, the One Country, Two Systems policy showed the government's "political tolerance," he said.

Zhang also lashed out at suggestions of punishment from other nations.

"As for... some countries now saying that they will impose severe sanctions on some Chinese officials, I think this is the logic of bandits."

Hong Kong police made the first arrests under the new national security law on Wednesday. By Wednesday afternoon police said two people had been arrested under the new law, a man and a woman both carrying Hong Kong secession signs.

"Advocacy for independence of Hong Kong is against the law," security minister John Lee told reporters.

A few thousand protesters defied a ban on rallies to gather in the shopping district of Causeway Bay on Wednesday, blocking some roads.

Riot police responded with water cannon and pepper spray, making at least 70 arrests.

U.S. Reports Biggest One-Day Spike in Virus Cases



Few people wear masks as they walk on the beach pier during the global outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in Oceanside, California, U.S., June 22, 2020.

WASHINGTON (Reuters) -- New U.S. COVID-19 cases rose by more than 47,000 on Tuesday according to a Reuters tally, the biggest one-day spike since the start of the pandemic, as the government's top infectious disease expert warned that number could soon double.

California and Arizona have emerged as new U.S. epicenters of the pandemic, reporting record increases in COVID-19 cases.

"Clearly we are not in total control right now," Dr. Anthony Fauci, head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Dis-

eases, told a U.S. Senate committee. "I am very concerned because it could get very bad."

Fauci said the daily increase in new cases could reach 100,000 unless a nationwide push was made to tamp down the resurgent virus.

"We can't just focus on those areas that are having the surge. It puts the entire country at risk," he said.

Fauci said there was no guarantee of a vaccine, although early data had been promising: "Hopefully there will be doses available by the beginning of next year," he said.

COVID-19 cases more than doubled in June in at least 10 states,

including Texas and Florida, a Reuters tally showed. In parts of Texas and Arizona, hospital intensive care beds for COVID-19 patients are in short supply.

More than 126,000 Americans have died from COVID-19 and millions have lost their jobs as states and major cities ordered residents to stay home and businesses closed. The economy contracted sharply in the first quarter and is expected to crater in the second.

The European Union has excluded Americans from its "safe list" of countries from which the bloc will allow non-essential travel beginning on Wednesday.

The fresh rise in cases and hospitalizations has dimmed hopes that the worst of the human and economic pain had passed, prompting renewed criticism of U.S. President Donald Trump as he seeks re-election on Nov. 3.

His rival, Democrat Joe Biden, on Tuesday said that Trump's "historic mismanagement" of the pandemic cost lives and inflicted more damage than necessary to the U.S. economy.

"It didn't have to be this way. Donald Trump failed us," the 77-year-old former vice president said in a speech in Delaware, where he unveiled an updated plan to tackle the pandemic calling for more testing and the hiring of 100,000 contract tracers.

Brazil Airdrops Virus Supplies to Amazon Communities



A Colombian Huitoto man sails on a raft along the Takana river in Leticia, Amazonas department, Colombia, on May 20, 2020 during the coronavirus pandemic.

BOA VISTA, Brazil (Reuters) -- Brazil's military delivered protective supplies and medicines by helicopter to isolated Amazon indigenous communities bordering Venezuela and tested frightened members for COVID-19.

None tested positive to the rapid finger-prick tests, but the coronavirus pandemic is threatening to decimate hundreds of Amazon tribes that have no immunity to external diseases and whose communal lifestyle rules out social distancing.

The operation to help the Yanomami who live on Brazil's largest reservation is aimed at countering criticism that the right-wing government of President Jair Bolsonaro is not doing enough to protect indigenous people from contagion.

"The main goal of this joint operation by the armed forces is to track COVID-19s in the nearby villages," naval medic Captain Jarbas de Souza said.

The Army airlifted supplies from the Roraima state capital of Boa Vista on a Blackhawk helicopter to a military frontier post deep in the rainforest, with boxes of face masks, alcohol gel,

aprons, gloves, tests and medicines, including 13,500 pills of the controversial anti-malaria drug chloroquine.

Apprehensive Yanomami and Yekuana people, barefoot and wearing masks, lined up to be tested or seen by doctors for other health issues in a nearby village. Babies cried after the finger pricks.

"They are scared," said Elaine Maciel, of the regional office of the government's indigenous affairs agency Funai.

"It is an unknown virus to them, as it is for us. Many preferred to isolate themselves and not come to see the medical team as a way of avoiding contagions," she said.

Maciel said the Yekuana, who have about the gravity of the coronavirus pandemic, were the most frightened of contact, while the Yanomami interacted easily, exchanging gifts with the outsiders, their craftwork for bars of soap and batteries.

Brazilian Minister of Defense Fernando Azevedo, a retired army general, will visit the operation at the Auaris border post on Wednesday.

One Killed, Several Injured in Protests in Sudan

KHARTOUM (Dispatches) -- One person was killed and several others injured during largely peaceful demonstrations in Sudan, a government spokesman said, as tens of thousands of people took to the streets demanding faster reform and greater civilian rule.

Waving Sudanese flags, protesters gathered in Khartoum and its twin cities Khartoum North and Omdurman after the government closed roads and bridges leading to the center of the capital in the largest demonstrations since a transitional government took power late last year following the ouster of Omar al-Bashir after three decades.

Similar protests took place across the country, including Kassala in eastern Sudan and in the restive region of Darfur. Protesters chanted "freedom, peace and justice," the slogan of the anti-Bashir movement. Some protesters blocked streets with burning tires.

The gathering on June 30 came on a highly symbolic day, as it was the anniversary of Bashir's ascent to power in a 1989 military coup and also marks the day one year ago when thousands marched to pressure the generals who assumed power after Bashir's ouster to resume negotiations over a peaceful power-sharing deal with civilian opposition.

Premier Abdalla Hamdok, a technocrat, governs the country in awkward tandem with the long-dominant military that

helped remove Bashir after mass protests against his 30-year autocracy.

The opposition coalition agreed to joint governance with the military in a three-year transition towards free elections, but key parts of the deal have not been implemented, such as appointing civilian state governors and establishing a parliament.

During Tuesday's rallies, many protesters renewed their calls for the transitional government to fulfil the agreement. Hamdok's government has been preoccupied with a worsening economic crisis. Sudan's pound currency has plunged and annual inflation has topped 100%.

Last week, foreign donor nations pledged \$1.8 billion at a conference hosted by Germany to help Sudan overcome the economic crisis hampering its transition. That was well below the \$8 billion in aid Hamdok has said is needed.

The crisis has been compounded by the coronavirus pandemic, which has diverted the resources of many donors.

Hamdok sought to appease disgruntled citizens with a speech Monday night in which he said he would announce major decisions on the way forward within two weeks.

"The transitional government ...(is) aiming to achieve the highest levels of consensus and popular approval," he said, though he gave no details.



BEIJING (AFP) -- China on Wednesday ordered four U.S. news outlets to disclose details on their staff and financial operations in the country within seven days, as a media row escalates between Washington and Beijing. The Associated Press, United Press International, CBS and NPR must report the information -- as well as details of any real estate they hold in China -- in retaliation for Washington's crackdown this month on four Chinese state media outlets, foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said. China's actions are "entirely necessary countermeasures against the United States' unreasonable oppression of Chinese media organizations in the U.S.," Zhao said at a regular press briefing. The U.S. State Department on June 22 reclassified four Chinese state media outlets as foreign missions in the United States, adding to five others designated in February. After the first group of outlets were ordered to cut their Chinese staff working in the United States, Beijing hit back by expelling U.S. nationals working for The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal and The Washington Post.

ROME (AFP) -- Italian police said Wednesday they have seized a world record 14-tonne haul of amphetamines made by the Daesh group in Syria. The drug, in the form of 84 million Captagon tablets, was worth about one billion euros, police said in a statement, describing the operation as "the biggest seizure of amphetamines in the world." "We know that Daesh finances its terrorist activities mainly by trafficking drugs made in Syria which in the past few years has become the world's largest producer of amphetamines," the statement added. The shipment was hidden in three containers found in the port of Salerno, just south of Naples.

VIENNA (Reuters) -- Russia has told the UN atomic agency there have been no nuclear incidents on its territory that could explain elevated but still harmless levels of radioactive particles detected on the Baltic Sea last week, the UN agency said. A separate body, the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO), which watches for nuclear weapon tests, said on Friday a monitoring station in Sweden had found higher-than-usual levels of caesium-134, caesium-137 and ruthenium-103. The CTBTO said they were produced by nuclear fission. CTBTO chief Lassina Zerbo posted a borderless map online showing where the particles might have come from in the 72 hours before they were detected - an area covering the tips of Denmark and Norway as well as southern Sweden, much of Finland, Baltic countries and part of western Russia including St. Petersburg. All those countries except Denmark, which has no nuclear power plants and Russia, which has a history of not fully explaining incidents that emitted radioactive particles, told the International Atomic Energy Agency by Monday that there were no events on their territory that could explain the increase.

WASHINGTON (Reuters) -- Hundreds of officials who worked for former Republican President George W. Bush are set to endorse Democratic White House hopeful Joe Biden, people involved in the effort said, the latest Republican-led group coming out to oppose the re-election of Donald Trump. The officials, who include Cabinet secretaries and other senior people in the Bush administration, have formed a political action committee - 43 Alumni for Biden - to support the former vice president in his Nov. 3 race, three organizers of the group told Reuters. Bush was the country's 43rd president. The Super PAC will launch on Wednesday with a website and Facebook page, they said. It plans to release "testimonial videos" praising Biden from high-profile Republicans and will hold get-out-the-vote efforts in the most competitive states.

ADDIS ABABA (Reuters) -- At least 50 people were killed in Ethiopia's Oromiya region in protests following the fatal shooting of a popular singer, a regional spokesman said on Wednesday. Musician Haacaaluu Hundeessaa was shot dead on Monday night in what police said was a targeted killing. Protests broke out the next morning in the capital and other cities in the Oromiya region. The dead included protesters and members of the security forces, spokesman Getachew Balcha said. Some businesses had also been set on fire. Haacaaluu's songs provided a soundtrack to a generation of young protesters whose three years of street demonstrations culminated in the resignation of the previous prime minister and the beginning of an era with greater political freedoms. His funeral is due to take place on Thursday.

CORFU, Greece (AFP) -- Greece prepared to welcome tourist flights to its island destinations on Wednesday for the first time in months, as it raced to salvage a tourism season shredded by the coronavirus pandemic. More than 100 flights from other EU nations and a select group of non-EU countries are expected at 14 regional airports including Corfu, Santorini, Mykonos, Rhodes and Crete, airport operator Fraport said. Flights from Britain, one of its most lucrative travel markets, are not due to restart until July 15 at the earliest, in line with EU recommendations. The same applies to the United States, Russia, Turkey and Sweden. Greece halted most flights three months ago as part of restrictions aimed at stopping the spread of coronavirus, but the measures have seen the sector's revenues plummet. All Greek airports are now receiving international flights and the ports of Patras and Igoumenisa will again receive ferries from Italy. Fourteen non-EU countries -- including Australia, Canada, Japan and Uruguay -- have been deemed safe enough for visitors to be allowed back.