

Amnesty Chief Blasts Vaccine Hoarding by Rich Nations



Passengers wearing protective face masks travel on a public bus during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil April 29, 2020.

PARIS (AP) — Agnès Callamard is best known for her investigation into the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, and has made a career uncovering extrajudicial killings.

The French human rights expert's focus on rights abuses is taking on new dimensions as she assumes leadership of Amnesty International and turns her attention to what she says is one of the world's most pressing issues — vaccine equity to end the coronavirus pandemic, which has eroded freedoms globally.

Amnesty International released its annual report on Wednesday, argu-

ing that governments have used the coronavirus pandemic as an excuse to clamp down on human rights, whether or not that was the original intent. The wide-ranging report took particular aim at governments in Myanmar and Russia, among others, but also criticized the use of coronavirus-related police powers in places like Britain and the United States against protesters.

The only way to end the virus — and the abuses that have accompanied it, primarily against the world's most vulnerable — is to distribute vaccines globally and equitably, she told The Associated Press on Tuesday.

“What we found is that the victims of COVID, whether it was in the UK, in France, in the U.S., in India, in the Middle East, in Brazil, those victims were primarily among the most disenfranchised and vulnerable groups,” she said. “As a global community, as a national community, we failed the test that COVID-19 represented.”

Callamard rarely hesitates to call out the powerful. In 2019, as a UN special rapporteur, she concluded there was “credible evidence” that Khashoggi's killing was state-sanctioned. She also investigated the U.S. drone strike that assassinated Iranian commander General Qassem Soleimani and concluded it was unlawful.

She said she will no longer lead her own investigations, as she has done for years for the UN — but will continue to call out human rights violations as she sees them. And the pandemic exposed plenty. Ending it, she said, will expose even more, especially among wealthy and powerful nations which have purchased more vaccines than they need.

“Not only do we buy everything, but on top of it, we stop others from being able to produce it. In the name of what? In the name of profit and in the name of greed,” Callamard said, referring to the European Union and U.S. decision to block a proposal to relax intellectual property restrictions on patents related to coronavirus treatments and vaccines.

U.S. Ship Sails Thru Taiwan Strait in Fresh Escalation



The Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyer USS John S. McCain prepares to depart from dry dock at Fleet Activities Yokosuka after an extensive maintenance period in Yokosuka, Japan, November 27, 2018.

TAIPEI (Dispatches) — The guided missile destroyer USS John S. McCain sailed through the Taiwan Strait on Wednesday, the U.S. Navy said, as China sent more fighter jets into Taiwan's so-called air defense zone and a Chinese carrier group drilled near Taiwan.

The island said 15 Chinese aircraft including 12 fighters entered the zone, with an anti-submarine aircraft flying to the south through the Bashi Channel between Taiwan and the Philippines.

Taiwan's air force sent up aircraft to intercept and warn the Chinese away, it added.

China has said its activities around Taiwan are aimed at protecting China's sovereignty.

Adding to the tensions, the U.S. Navy said the guided missile destroyer USS John S. McCain conducted a “routine” transit of the Taiwan Strait on Wednesday.

On Monday, China said an aircraft carrier group was exercising close to the island.

Neither side has said precisely where the Chinese carrier group is, or whether it is heading towards the South China Sea, where a U.S. carrier group is currently operating.

A person familiar with Taiwan's se-

curity planning told Reuters the carrier group is still “near the Japanese islands”, though declined to disclose the exact location.

Japan had said on Sunday that the Chinese carrier group had entered the Pacific after sailing through the Miyako Strait, through Japan's southern Ryukyu island chain northeast of Taiwan.

Washington, Taiwan's arms supplier, has been pushing Taipei to modernize its military so it can become a “porcupine”, hard for China to attack.

Taiwan's Defense Ministry said it will run eight days of computer-aided war games this month, simulating a Chinese attack. A second phase of exercises, including live-fire drills and anti-landing drills, will take place in July, when hospitals would also practice handling mass casualties.

Asked if Washington's de facto embassy, the American Institute in Taiwan, would send representatives to the drills, Major General Liu Yu-Ping said such a plan was “discussed” but “will not be implemented”, citing military sensitivity.

The American military is claiming that China is probably accelerating its timetable for capturing control of Taiwan.

Myanmar Troops Raid Town After Armed Protests



General view of a fire at JOC Galaxy (Myanmar) Apparel Co. in Hlaing Thar Yar township, Yangon, Myanmar April 7, 2021.

YANGON, Myanmar (AP) — Security forces on Wednesday stormed a town in northwestern Myanmar where some residents had used homemade hunting rifles to resist the military's February seizure of power, killing at least seven civilians and injuring many others, local news reports said.

The online news site Khonumthung Burmese said the attack on Kalay began before dawn. Videos on the site included what appeared to be sounds of rifle fire, high-caliber weapons and grenade explosions. Posts on social media said rocket-propelled grenades were used in the attack, but provided no evidence.

The news site said that in addition to the seven fatalities, many people were wounded and arrested in the town, also known as Kalemeyo. Over half the town's population are members of the Chin ethnic minority.

Security forces have killed at least 581 protesters and bystanders in their crackdown on protests against the Feb. 1 coup that ousted the government of Aung San Suu Kyi, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, which monitors casualties and arrests.

Nearly all of the protests have been nonviolent, but as police and soldiers have increased their use of lethal force, some participants have armed them-

selves with homemade weapons such as gasoline bombs for self-defense. In Kalay, some residents took up simple but deadly homemade hunting rifles.

Myanmar Now, another online news site, reported Tuesday that protesters in Kalay had set up neighborhood strongholds and inflicted casualties on the security forces.

It said that on March 28, when the army sought to attack Kalay, protesters in the town and nearby villages put up fierce resistance. The attack took place a day after the junta's forces killed more than 110 people around the country, the highest single-day death toll since the coup.

The report said protesters “more than held their own. Four of them died that night, but so did an equal number of the enemy, including an officer or two. The protesters also managed to wound 17 of their heavily armed attackers.”

The protesters, who have organized themselves in a “Kalay Civil Army,” inflicted more casualties in the following days, it said.

Daily protests against military rule continued Wednesday in other cities and towns, including Mogok in central Myanmar, and Bago, northeast of Yangon, where social media posts said security forces fired live ammunition at demonstrators.

Russia Defends Troops Near Ukraine Border



A Ukrainian service member walks along fighting positions on the contact line with Russian-backed separatist rebels near the town of Avdiivka in Donetsk Region, Ukraine February 13, 2021.

MOSCOW (Dispatches) — The Kremlin said on Wednesday that Russia would keep military forces near the country's border with Ukraine for as long as it saw fit and that they posed no external threat.

Ukraine on Tuesday called on NATO to lay out a path for it to join the Western military alliance, drawing an immediate rebuke from Moscow.

Russia on Tuesday announced the start of mass military drills. More than 4,000 training exercises will be held in military districts across Russia in April, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said, in comments posted on the ministry's website.

Russia denies it's threatening Ukraine and accuses the government in Kyiv of preparing a

military offensive to regain control of the eastern conflict zone.

NATO membership won't help Ukraine solve “its internal problems,” Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said. “From our point of view, this will further aggravate the situation,” he said.

Voladimir Zelenskiy urged greater pressure on Russia in a phone call with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau Tuesday, a day after he spoke with UK Premier Boris Johnson. Ukraine's foreign and defense ministers held talks with their U.S. and UK counterparts last week about tensions in the eastern Donbas region, while Zelenskiy's chief of staff spoke to U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan.

The U.S. has provided Ukraine with military equipment, includ-

ing Javelin anti-tank missiles. In his first official phone call as president with Zelenskiy last week, Joe Biden pledged to stand with Ukraine against what he called Russian “aggression.”

On Tuesday, however, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said questions about NATO membership should be handled by the alliance. “That's a decision for NATO to make,” Psaki said.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov rounded on Western nations for backing what he called Kyiv's “absolutely unacceptable actions and statements.”

The U.S. has reportedly delivered three military cargoes to Ukraine in the last fortnight.

On March 25, 350 tonnes of cargo were delivered to Odessa by the ship Ocean Glory. The shipment included 35 Humvee SUVs, the agency Ukrinform reported.

Local news outlets have reported further deliveries. On April 2, a U.S. Air Force C-17A Globemaster III military transport aircraft flew to Kyiv from the U.S. base in Ramstein, Germany, according to the Odessa newspaper Dumskaya.

Two days later, another C-17A Globemaster III, which can carry 102 troops and 77 tons of cargo, landed in the western city of Lviv, the newspaper reported.

At the beginning of March, the Department of Defense announced that the U.S. would give \$125 million of military aid to Kyiv in the 2021 fiscal year.

Study: Third of COVID Survivors Suffer Mental Disorders

LONDON (Reuters) — One in three COVID-19 survivors in a study of more than 230,000 mostly American patients were diagnosed with a brain or psychiatric disorder within six months, suggesting the pandemic could lead to a wave of mental and neurological problems, scientists said.

Researchers who conducted the analysis said it was not clear how the virus was linked to psychiatric conditions such as anxiety and depression, but that these were the most common diagnoses among the 14 disorders they looked at.

Post-COVID cases of stroke, dementia and other neurological disorders were rarer, the researchers said, but were still significant, especially in those who had severe COVID-19.

“Although the individual risks for most disorders are small, the effect across the whole population may be substantial,” said Paul Harrison, a professor of psychiatry at Oxford University who co-led the work.

Max Taquet, also an Oxford psychiatrist who worked with

Harrison, noted that the study was not able to examine the biological or psychological mechanisms involved, but said urgent research is needed to identify these “with a view to preventing or treating them”.

Health experts are increasingly concerned by evidence of higher risks of brain and mental health disorders among COVID-19 survivors. A previous study by the same researchers found last year that 20% of COVID-19 survivors were diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder within three months.

The new findings, published in the Lancet Psychiatry journal, analyzed health records of 236,379 COVID-19 patients, mostly from the United States, and found 34% had been diagnosed with neurological or psychiatric illnesses within six months.

The disorders were significantly more common in COVID-19 patients than in comparison groups of people who recovered from flu or other respiratory infections over the same time period, the scientists said, suggesting COVID-19 had a specific impact.

News in Brief

BEIJING (Reuters) — China's President Xi Jinping on Wednesday told German Chancellor Angela Merkel Sino-EU relations were facing “various challenges” and he hoped the 27-nation bloc could “independently” make correct judgments, Chinese state media reported. In a phone call with Merkel, who has led Germany, the EU's biggest economy, since 2005, Xi said the EU and China should “respect each other” and “eliminate interference,” according to a readout from the official Xinhua news agency, without naming the source of such interference. The EU last month imposed its first significant sanctions against Chinese officials since 1989 over alleged human rights abuses in China's Xinjiang region. Beijing, which denies the allegations, quickly hit back by blacklisting some EU lawmakers and entities. EU allies the United States, Britain and Canada also sanctioned Chinese officials over Xinjiang, and the row is threatening to derail an EU-China investment pact agreed in late 2020 after years of negotiations.

BERLIN (AP) — German Chancellor Angela Merkel on Wednesday threw her weight behind a “short, uniform lockdown” as the country grapples with a high level of coronavirus cases fueled by the spread of a more contagious variant first detected in Britain. German state governors, who are responsible for imposing and lifting virus restrictions, have taken differing approaches lately. Some have continued to back limited reopening steps while others advocate a stricter shutdown. Armin Laschet, a governor who also leads Merkel's conservative party, called this week for a vaguely defined 2-3 week “bridge lockdown” to control infections while Germany steps up a so-far slow vaccination campaign. Laschet also called for a meeting between Merkel and governors to coordinate restrictions to be moved up from next Monday, but hit resistance from his colleagues. Merkel spokeswoman Ulrike Demmer said Wednesday there is “no majority” for that.

PRAGUE (AP) — Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babis fired his health minister on Wednesday, the third health minister who has been ousted during the pandemic in one of Europe's hardest-hit countries. Jan Blatny was replaced by Petr Arenberger, the director of Prague's University Hospital Vlnohrady, who was sworn in by President Milos Zeman. The move opens the way for a possible use of Russian and Chinese vaccines, which have not been approved by the European Union's drug regulator. Babis repeatedly criticized Blatny over his handling of the pandemic, including imposing strict conditions for the use of experimental drugs to treat COVID-19 patients. Blatny was also under fire from Zeman, an ally of Babis who is known for his pro-Russian and pro-Chinese views. Zeman asked the prime minister last month to replace Blatny over his refusal to allow the use of Russia's Sputnik V vaccine because it has not been approved by the European Medicines Agency.

NEW YORK (AP) — A tourist from Kansas was hit in the shoulder by a stray bullet near New York's Times Square early Wednesday, police said. The 44-year-old man was shot shortly after 2 a.m. near West 38th Street and Eighth Avenue, a police spokesman said. Police do not believe he was the intended target, the spokesman said. The man was taken to Bellevue Hospital and is stable, police said. The Daily News reports that the victim told police he attended Tuesday's Mets-Phillies game in Philadelphia and then took a train or bus back to New York. The man was headed to his hotel when shots were fired, police said.

SEOUL (Reuters) — South Korean President Moon Jae-in's party suffered a crushing defeat in a special election for key mayoral posts amid a spate of political scandals and policy blunders, exit polls showed on Thursday. Tens of millions of South Koreans voted on Wednesday to elect chiefs of the country's two largest cities, the capital Seoul and the port of Busan, among 21 local offices up for grabs. The election was a key barometer for potential political shifts by Moon's progressive Democratic party with less than a year left before the next presidential election. Moon and his party have seen their approval ratings sink to record lows in recent months amid skyrocketing home prices, deepening inequality, sex abuse scandals and souring relations with North Korea. In Seoul, main opposition People Power contender Oh Se-hoon secured 59% among 8.4 million voters, exit polls by three major broadcasters showed, while Democratic candidate Park Young-sun garnered 37.7%.

MILAN (Reuters) — Former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has been in hospital since Tuesday afternoon for check-ups, two sources from his Forza Italia party said on Wednesday. One of the sources said the 84-year-old media tycoon went to the San Raffaele hospital in Milan for follow-up tests after contracting the new coronavirus in September last year. This is the second time in just a few weeks that Berlusconi finds himself in hospital, after another routine check-up at the end of March. Forza Italia said then that he had been admitted for clinical monitoring and adjustment to an ongoing therapy. Berlusconi, who underwent major heart surgery in 2016 and has also survived prostate cancer, was admitted to hospital in January this year as well because of heart problems.