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Switzerland in the local press

Coronavirus attacks lining of blood vessels all over the body, Swiss study finds (SCMP, April 21): The coronavirus attacks the lining of blood vessels all over the body, which can ultimately lead to multiple organ failure, according to a new study published in The Lancet. “This virus does not only attack the lungs, it attacks the vessels everywhere,” said Frank Ruschitzka, an author of the paper from University Hospital Zurich. That also explained why smokers and people with pre-existing conditions who had a weakened endothelial function, or unhealthy blood vessels, were more vulnerable to the novel coronavirus, he said. On top of a vaccination that reduces virus replication, he suggested strengthening vascular health may be key to treating Covid-19 patients.

Foreign Policy/International Relations

US lawmakers want Mike Pompeo to highlight democracy activists’ arrests in Hong Kong autonomy evaluation (SCMP, April 29): A bipartisan group of US lawmakers wrote Secretary of State Mike Pompeo requesting that his department’s upcoming assessment of Hong Kong’s autonomy reflect a recent wave of arrests by the city’s authorities of pro-democracy activists. In addition to the recent arrests, the US lawmakers also raised concern about the assertion made by Beijing’s liaison office in the special administrative region that it is not bound by a clause in the Basic Law, Hong Kong’s mini-constitution, that protects against interference in the city’s affairs by mainland departments. The letter called for a “comprehensive, clear, and accurate” assessment of Hong Kong’s autonomy under new reporting requirements stipulated by the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act.

Chief Secretary Matthew Cheung and Justice Secretary Teresa Cheng slam overseas comments over the arrests of opposition figures (SCMP, April 27): Chief Secretary Matthew Cheung and Secretary for Justice Teresa Cheng rejected international and domestic criticism of the rounding up of 15 pro-democracy figures. They have blasted suggestions that the arrests were politically motivated as they insisted the charges would not be dropped. “Anyone, including foreign governments and lawmakers, cannot interfere with Hong Kong’s internal affairs or try to interfere with the Department of Justice’s independent decision to prosecute,” Cheung said. The swoop prompted responses from the United Nations, the International Bar Association, the United States, British and Australian governments as well as more than 30 members of the European Parliament.

Beijing foreign affairs office in Hong Kong hits back at governments for criticising arrests of pro-democracy figures (SCMP, April 19): Beijing’s foreign affairs office in Hong Kong has hit back at governments and politicians who criticised the arrests of 15 pro-democracy figures for their roles in unlawful protests last year, saying their attempts to condone anti-China troublemakers were “completely wrong”. The Commissioner’s Office urged the governments of Britain and United States and other politicians to stop meddling in the city’s affairs, which were completely China’s internal matters. Apart from Britain and the US, the arrests also aroused criticisms from the Australian government, an international bar association, other overseas politicians and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association.

Mainland Relation

Basic Law’s Article 22 ‘does not apply’ to Beijing’s liaison office, Hong Kong justice secretary says (SCMP, April 28): Beijing’s Hong Kong liaison office is not bound by a clause in the Basic Law that guarantees non-interference from mainland departments in local affairs, the city’s justice minister Teresa Cheng said. “Article 22 of the Basic Law does not apply to the liaison office,” Cheng said. The article states that “no department of the Central People’s Government and no province, autonomous region, or municipality directly under the Central Government” shall interfere in Hong Kong affairs. She said that while the office represented Beijing in Hong Kong, it was not a central government department, meaning it was not referenced in Article 22 and therefore not limited by it.

Coronavirus pandemic and protests highlight need for national security legislation in Hong Kong, says Beijing’s top official in city (SCMP, April 16): Being hit by the double whammy of the coronavirus pandemic and social unrest showed that it was urgent for Hong Kong to do more in protecting national security, according to Luo Huining, director of the central government’s liaison office in Hong Kong. He also urged the city to work together in opposing acts that threaten its stability. The HK Government has been facing mounting pressure from Beijing to relaunch Article 23 (national security legislation) amid the social unrest that erupted in June last year. Chief Executive Carrie Lam also said that last year’s social unrest had made society feel more strongly about the importance of protecting national security.

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Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office and Liaison Office slam Hong Kong's opposition lawmakers for not taking their oath seriously (SCMP, April 14): Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office (HKMAO) blamed filibustering by pan-democrat lawmakers for the Legislative Council House Committee's failure to elect a chairman since last October. "Their behaviour amounts to a breach of the [Legislative Council] oath, and constitutes an offence of misconduct in public office." The liaison office in Hong Kong also said the filibustering was a breach of the lawmakers' oath to "uphold the Basic Law, bear allegiance to the Hong Kong SAR, and serve the Hong Kong SAR conscientiously, dutifully". Dennis Kwok, who for procedural reasons has presided over the committee's meetings, rejected the two Beijing agencies' criticisms as "unfounded and political invective", saying they had no role to play in the city's domestic affairs and may have been in breach of the "one country, two systems" principle by interjecting themselves.

Chief Executive Carrie Lam stands by 'one-China' criticisms levelled at Hong Kong public broadcaster over Taiwan questions to WHO official (SCMP, April 8): Chief Executive Carrie Lam has defended the commerce minister Edward Yau's criticisms of the city's public broadcaster RTHK, which he said had breached the "one China" policy by allowing one of its reporters to press a top World Health Organisation (WHO) on Taiwan's membership status. "RTHK has to fulfil the very important and fundamental principle of upholding 'one country, two systems'," Lam said. Beijing officials have previously argued that to understand "one country, two systems" correctly, one must accept the one-China policy.

Domestic Policy/Politics

Some social-distancing measures to ease next month (SCMP, April 29): Hong Kong will partially ease coronavirus social-distancing measures next month, with some business establishments gradually being allowed to reopen after May 7 and secondary school pupils resuming classes when university entrance exams finish, government sources say, while civil servants will return to their workplaces on May 4. Word of the relaxation followed an announcement by health chief Sophia Chan that quarantine restrictions would be eased for some arrivals from mainland China, providing exemptions for cross-border pupils and people deemed economically important. The decisions, which won instant support from the business sector, were made as the city recorded no new coronavirus cases for a third straight day.

Leader Carrie Lam says cabinet reshuffle aimed at post-coronavirus recovery (SCMP, April 22): Hong Kong's leader Carrie Lam announced new ministerial roles for five principal officials and bid farewell to four others leaving her administration, in a major cabinet reshuffle that she said was required to meet the challenges ahead and rebuild the city after the ravages of the coronavirus pandemic. Lam was speaking at a press conference shortly after Beijing's State Council announced that, based on her recommendations, it would appoint new secretaries for technology, financial services, home affairs, mainland affairs and the civil service in the city.

Government extends restrictions in city for another two weeks, keeping bars, pubs and other businesses closed until May 7 (SCMP, April 21): The temporary ban on some businesses opening in Hong Kong has been extended for two more weeks, but certain restrictions on the city's restaurants were being relaxed. Bars, pubs, beauty salons, massage parlours, and karaoke bars are among the 11 premises that must now remain shut until May 7, at the earliest. The growth of Covid-19 cases in Hong Kong has eased recently. Chief executive Carrie Lam says this is 'not the time to be complacent'.

Pan-democrats condemn wave of arrests of veterans as a bid to silence dissent but authorities say it's for unlawful protests (SCMP, April 19): Hong Kong police rounded up at least 15 veterans and supporters of the opposition camp in a swoop that netted, among others, media tycoon Jimmy Lai and prominent barrister Martin Lee for their roles in unlawful protests last year. Pan-democrat legislators said the arrests, which came after recent accusations by three Beijing authorities that the camp had been blocking and disrupting legislative proceedings, were meant to silence dissent. Police chief Chris Tang said operation had nothing to do with recent remarks by the Beijing authorities in the city. He said officers handled the cases fairly and fearlessly regardless of the social status of the suspects.

Legislature approves HK\$137.5 billion aid package (SCMP, April 18): Hong Kong's legislature approved a HK\$137.5 billion (US\$18 billion) package of relief measures aimed at helping the city during the coronavirus pandemic. But lawmakers on both sides of the political divide said more needed to be done for workers and the unemployed. The measures include HK\$80 billion worth of wage subsidies to cover up to 50 per cent of workers' salaries for six months, capped at HK\$9,000 a month, along with one-off handouts for the hardest-hit sectors.

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Mask ban legal when aimed at unauthorised protests, Court of Appeal rules in partially overturning lower court verdict (SCMP, April 10): The Court of Appeal ruled that while it was constitutional for the government to ban the wearing of masks at unauthorised or illegal assemblies, the same was not true for legal demonstrations. Language in the ban granting police the authority to physically remove masks was also unconstitutional, it added. The three appeal court justices also ruled that the government had the power to invoke the colonial-era Emergency Regulations Ordinance (ERO) in legislating the ban, overturning the lower court's ruling that such a move would be unconstitutional, even if the city faced a state of "public danger".

Anti-government protests: more than 7,600 arrested during unrest (SCMP, April 8): Hong Kong police have arrested more than 7,600 people during the social unrest which has gripped the city since June, of whom 1,200 of those have been prosecuted. About 17.5 per cent of the arrestees were under 18. As of the end of February, officers had fired 16,191 rounds of tear gas, 10,100 rubber bullets, 1,880 sponge bullets, 2,033 beanbag rounds and 19 live rounds. The Complaints Against Police Office, which is part of the force, received 1,678 cases stemming from the protests, most of them alleging misconduct, negligence or assault by officers.

1,200 pubs and bars to close as government orders two-week shutdown (SCMP, April 2): The Hong Kong government has ordered a two-week closure of pubs and bars from April 3, in a drastic escalation of social-distancing rules which will mothball about 1,200 businesses. Secretary for Food and Health Sophia Chan said the shutdown was needed given that 69 local Covid-19 cases involved visits to bars or pubs. The bar industry accused officials of singling it out, while the government was pilloried for not taking action earlier.

Economy/Finance

Major threats to Hong Kong economy are under control during coronavirus crisis, Financial Secretary Paul Chan says (SCMP, April 27): The financial risks to Hong Kong are under control during the coronavirus crisis, Financial Secretary Paul Chan said as he revealed the government had approved more than HK\$400 million (US\$52 million) worth of full loan guarantees for businesses in the first few days of the scheme. The government had to manage financial risk in three areas to safeguard the city's economic security, Chan added. They are to maintain a stable exchange rate, ensure the liquidity of banks, and uphold the orderly operation of financial and asset markets.

Unemployment rate rises for sixth straight month in March amid pandemic (SCMP, April 21): Hong Kong's unemployment rate shot up in March for the sixth straight month, hitting a new high of 4.2 per cent in more than nine years. Secretary for Labour and Welfare Law Chi-kwong warned the economy would continue to face the onslaught of the pandemic. The unemployment rate rose across all major economic sectors in March, with the food and beverage sector hardest hit at 8.6 per cent, followed by the construction sector at 8.5 per cent and consumption and tourism-related sectors at 6.8 per cent.

Fitch downgrades Hong Kong as pandemic poses 'economic shock' (SCMP, April 21): Hong Kong's rating was lowered to AA-minus from AA with a stable outlook, with real gross domestic product expected to fall by 5 per cent this year after a 1.2 per cent decline in 2019, Fitch said in a report. It said the city is facing a "second major shock" from the coronavirus after prolonged social unrest last year. It also said the downgrade reflected its view that Hong Kong's gradual integration into mainland China's national governance system and increased economic, financial and socio-political links to the country justified a closer alignment of their respective sovereign ratings.

Finance chief rules out issuing bonds to pay for pandemic deficit (SCMP, April 16): Hong Kong has ruled out issuing bonds to cover a widening budget shortfall as the government grapples with the economic fallout from the coronavirus pandemic. Financial Secretary Paul Chan said the city would adhere to strict fiscal discipline, as required by the law, despite the expectation of a "very significant deficit" in the upcoming financial year. He said selling debt was not the solution. "The market may misinterpret that the government is loosening our financial discipline in order to fund the deficit."

Deficit could balloon beyond HK\$276.6 billion, with economy shrinking more than expected, finance chief warns (SCMP, April 12): Hong Kong's finance chief Paul Chan has warned that the coronavirus pandemic could cost the government a deficit beyond the latest estimate of HK\$276.6 billion (US\$35.7 billion), while the city's economy could contract more than expected. The comments came after Chief Executive Carrie Lam unveiled the administration's largest financial relief package so far, offering a HK\$137.5 billion lifeline to save struggling businesses and ensure some 1.5 million workers would continue to get paid in the tough months ahead. Combined with previous government aid, this would total HK\$287.5 billion, causing this year's budget deficit to almost double from HK\$139.1 billion to HK\$276.6 billion, equivalent to 9.5 per cent of the city's gross domestic product.

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Passenger numbers bottom out (SCMP, April 6): As of April 2, the effective average passenger load on flights leaving the city stood at 2.7 per cent. For planes arriving at Hong Kong International Airport, loads were in the higher single-digit range, aided by returnees and repatriation flights. Cathay Pacific and Singapore Airlines have both cut their schedules by 96 per cent. With demand essentially non-existent, carriers around the globe are increasingly using passenger planes to fly cargo instead.

Retailers left reeling from double blow of social unrest and pandemic (SCMP, April 5): Businesses that relied on visitors from mainland China were caught off guard when anti-government protests drove them away. The Covid-19 pandemic has only further eroded sales, but some firms are adapting to the tough times and making changes that could help them flourish. Economist Andy Kwan said big chains with plenty of capital were likely to keep their physical shops open while many medium and small-sized retailers might close during the economic downturn and embrace online sales.

Technology/Innovation

Market can be better judge of good ideas than government, new innovation chief admits (SCMP, April 27): The Hong Kong government sometimes lacked market sense when deciding which emerging ideas or services to support, the new secretary for innovation and technology Alfred Sit said. He promised the government would better communicate with the public over privacy issues arising from new technologies, following fears “smart” lamp posts being erected across the city could track residents’ movements. Authorities had received about 300 proposals for different applications of technology to combat the contagion and they were being vetted by officials, the minister said.

US approves Google request to use segment of undersea cable connecting with Taiwan but not Hong Kong (Reuters, SCMP, April 10): Google has agreed to operate a portion of the 8,000-mile Pacific Light Cable Network System between the United States and Taiwan, but not Hong Kong. US authorities say they believe there is a ‘significant risk’ that a direct cable connection with Hong Kong would jeopardise national security. Hong Kong is a special administrative region of China, whose relations with the United States have soured over the deadly coronavirus pandemic, which was first detected in Wuhan, trade disputes and security concerns.

Macao

Macao will be in the red for first time since handover (SCMP, April 20): Chief Executive Ho Iat-seng delivered his maiden policy address that the government would spend more than 50 billion patacas (US\$6.27 billion)— about 12 per cent of its GDP – in relief measures to ease the impacts of the pandemic on the people’s livelihood and the businesses. He warned that Macau would be in the red for the first time in two decades this year as the Covid-19 pandemic had pushed down gaming revenue by about 60 per cent in the first quarter while traveller numbers had been down by more than half in the first two months of the year. He also noted that the pandemic had exposed the “vulnerability and risks” of Macau economy’s overreliance on gaming tourism.

Special Focus

Beijing’s liaison office says it has right to handle Hong Kong affairs, as provided by constitution and Basic Law (SCMP, April 18): Beijing’s top office in Hong Kong has rebutted accusations it was interfering in the city’s affairs in a strongly worded statement saying it had the responsibility and right to “supervise” how the “one country, two systems” policy was being implemented. The liaison office argued the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office and its office were not circumscribed by Article 22 of the Basic Law, which states no department directly under the central government may interfere in local matters. It said the two agencies were “authorised by the central government to handle Hong Kong affairs”, and did not belong to the category of “departments”. But democrats say the criticisms against ‘filibustering’ lawmakers amount to interference in local matters and ‘one country, two systems’ is being ‘torn apart’.

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