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Switzerland in the local press

Hundreds of British tourists flee from Swiss ski resort quarantine (AFP, SCMP, Dec. 27): Hundreds of guests supposed to quarantine in connection with a recently discovered mutation of the coronavirus have disappeared from the Swiss ski resort of Verbier, which is very popular with Britons. Some Britons have re-emerged in France after escaping from Verbier. Switzerland had stopped all flights from the Britain and South Africa on December 20 after new and suspected highly contagious variants of the coronavirus were detected in those countries.

Swiss and Vietnamese under US fire over currencies (RTHK, Dec. 16): The US Treasury labelled Switzerland and Vietnam as currency manipulators of taking measures to devalue their currencies against the dollar. It said that through June 2020 both Switzerland and Vietnam had intervened in currency markets to prevent effective balance of payments adjustments. To be labelled a manipulator, countries must at least have a US\$20 billion-plus bilateral trade surplus with the United States, foreign currency intervention exceeding 2% of GDP and a global current account surplus exceeding 2% of GDP.

Switzerland rejects criticism that deal with Chinese officials put dissidents at risk (SCMP, Dec. 12): Switzerland has strongly rejected accusations that an agreement with China allowing its officials to enter the country and interrogate Chinese nationals, which only recently came to light, had put dissidents at risk. The Swiss migration ministry flatly denied there was anything secretive about the China deal, insisting it was a standard, "technical arrangement" like the ones it had reached with some 60 other countries. While the agreement had never been posted publicly like many such deals, it "can be obtained on request at any time", it said in a statement.

Singapore to host World Economic Forum instead of Switzerland (SCMP, Dec. 8): The World Economic Forum (WEF) will be held in Singapore instead of Switzerland next year as the Covid-19 pandemic would make it difficult to ensure the health and safety of participants in Europe, WEF organisers said. WEF president Borge Brende said that health and safety concerns linked to the current Covid-19 situation in Europe made it impossible to organise the meeting in Lucerne-Buergenstock as initially planned, while Singapore had been successful in dealing with the pandemic.

Foreign Policy/International Relations

A huge real estate transaction caught in the crossfire of US-China relations (SCMP, Dec. 30): A huge real estate transaction (about US\$330 million) has been caught in the crossfire of US-China relations, as the United States consulate failed to receive written permission from the Chinese government's representative office in the territory. Any plan by the US consulate "to rent, purchase, sell or otherwise acquire or dispose of any real estate property in Hong Kong requires a written application and shall not proceed without the written consent of the Chinese government, because the US government's representative in Hong Kong is not a commercial entity and its asset is not an ordinary real estate property.

EU demands China release 12 detained Hongkongers (RTHK, Dec. 29): The European Union demanded China release citizen journalist Zhang Zhan and 12 Hong Kong activists detained at sea (attempting to flee to Taiwan), as it looks to seal an investment deal with Beijing. "The HK defendants' rights to a fair trial and due process – in accordance with international human rights law and as provided by China's Criminal Procedure Law – have not been respected," Peter Stano, EU foreign policy spokesman, said in a statement. "The EU calls for the immediate release of these 12 individuals and their swift return to Hong Kong."

US embassy in Beijing urged authorities to release detained Hongkongers (SCMP, Dec. 28): The US embassy in Beijing urged authorities to release 12 detained Hongkongers (attempting to flee to Taiwan) and allow them to depart the country. "Their so-called 'crime' was to flee tyranny. Communist China will stop at nothing to prevent its people from seeking freedom elsewhere," a spokesman said. "We call on Beijing and the Hong Kong government to abide by their international obligations and commitments and to respect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of the people of Hong Kong." The Chinese foreign ministry hit back, saying the 10 were charged in relation to illegally crossing the border. "Hong Kong issues are China's domestic affairs and the case concerned fell within China's jurisdiction," the Chinese foreign ministry said.

Activist Nathan Law seeking asylum in UK (RTHK, Dec. 22): Hong Kong democracy activist Nathan Law said he has applied for asylum in Britain, after fleeing in the wake of China's new security legislation. The founding member of Demosisto, a pro-democracy party that disbanded on the same day the law was imposed on the semi-autonomous territory, relocated to Britain in July. Law said he had left because of the new security law, which gave the government "sweeping powers to prosecute political dissidents in Hong Kong for speech crimes".

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Hong Kong lashes out at Britain over use of city's flag in meeting with activists (SCMP, Dec. 11): Hong Kong's government has lashed out at British officials for displaying the city's flag during a meeting with a group of activists in London. It also takes issue with new visa scheme, asserting it violates a joint declaration provision, saying ex-British subjects would not enjoy right of abode. In her meeting with activists including exiled former lawmaker Nathan Law, British Home Secretary Priti Patel pledged to stick up for Hongkongers.

China summons US diplomat over NPCSC sanctions (RTHK, Dec. 8): China has summoned the acting top US diplomat in Beijing to protest about US sanctions on 14 Chinese officials over Hong Kong, and vowed to take "reciprocal" counter measures. The SAR government also said that it strongly condemns "so-called sanctions" imposed by the United States. The United States imposed financial sanctions and a travel ban on all 14 vice-chairpersons of China's National People's Congress Standing Committee over their role in adopting a national security law for Hong Kong and Beijing's disqualification last month of four elected opposition legislators in Hong Kong.

Calls to free jailed trio 'absurd', government says (RTHK, Dec. 3): The government lashed out against international criticism of the jailings of prominent activists Joshua Wong, Agnes Chow and Ivan Lam, saying calls for their release are 'absurd'. The trio were jailed for 13.5, 10 and 7 months respectively, after pleading guilty to charges related to a rowdy protest last June. "As three Hong Kong activists begin prison sentences, I urge the Hong Kong and Beijing authorities to end their campaign to stifle opposition," British foreign secretary Dominic Raab wrote on Twitter.

Mainland Relation

Ten HK fugitives captured at sea jailed up to three years by Shenzhen court (SCMP, Dec. 30): Ten Hong Kong fugitives arrested at sea in August by mainland Chinese authorities while trying to flee to Taiwan were sentenced to between seven months and three years' jail by a Shenzhen court, as their two underage peers were handed over to Hong Kong police. Eight of the defendants were accused of illegally crossing the border and two of organising the crime. All 10 reportedly pleaded guilty at what the mainland court said was "an open trial" attended by family members and journalists. However, reporters from Hong Kong media organisations, as well as a group of Western diplomats, were refused access. Family members also said they were not allowed to attend the hearing.

HK and mainland officials discuss Covid in Shenzhen (RTHK, Dec. 22): Chief Secretary Matthew Cheung attended a meeting with mainland officials in Shenzhen to discuss the latest Covid-19 situation, including the development and use of vaccines across the border. During the meeting, health experts from both sides were said to have exchanged views on various prevention and control measures, including preventing the importation of cases, virus testing, and the usage and management of health codes. Cheung, for his part, thanked the central government for supporting HK's anti-epidemic efforts.

Domestic Policy/Politics

'State media must stop attacks on HK's judiciary' (RTHK, Dec. 30): Five members of the Law Society's governing body demanded that mainland state media stop their "unfounded attacks" on Hong Kong's judiciary. They singled out an editorial by the People's Daily that said pro-democracy media tycoon and national security suspect Jimmy Lai should be tried on the mainland. The editorial claimed that the High Court's decision to grant Lai bail had drastically hurt the SAR's rule of law. They warned that the editorial could be seen as putting pressure on the judiciary ahead of an appeal hearing over the bail decision, and could also prejudice Lai's right to a fair trial. They called for Justice Secretary Teresa Cheng to defend the judiciary against such "unwarranted actions".

National security law: 'about 30 people overseas' on the wanted list of police (SCMP, Dec. 27): Police are searching for about 30 people who are overseas on suspicion of violations under the national security law and they include self-exiled former lawmakers Ted Hui and Sixtus Baggio Leung. The force's national security unit has so far arrested 40 people since the sweeping legislation was imposed by Beijing on June 30. "[Those on the wanted list] are Hongkongers, but they are not in the city. Most of them are now in Europe, the United States and Taiwan," a police insider said.

Hotel quarantine for overseas arrivals extended to 21 days (SCMP, Dec. 25): All overseas arrivals into Hong Kong will have to quarantine in designated hotels for 21 days, up from the current 14 days – as city authorities further tightened control measures in their bid to contain the fourth wave of coronavirus infections. The only travellers exempted are those coming in from China, Macau and Taiwan, who will continue having to serve home quarantine for 14 days. Hong Kong authorities are also banning those who have stayed in South Africa for more than two hours within 21 days of boarding flights to the city.

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Regulations on emergency vaccine use now in force (RTHK, Dec. 24): Regulations have come into force that will allow the emergency use of vaccines against Covid-19, as the government readies a universal inoculation programme to stem the pandemic. They were gazetted after the government said it had procured enough vaccines to cover the entire population. All of the vaccines have been rushed to market, drawing safety concerns in some quarters. But Chief Executive Carrie Lam said more data is emerging, and people should look at facts, rather than country of origin.

Hong Kong bans UK flights over coronavirus variant (RTHK, Dec. 21): Hong Kong will suspend flights from the UK from Dec. 22 after a more infectious coronavirus variant hit the country, Secretary for Food and Health Sophia Chan said. The health chief said people who have stayed for more than two hours in the UK in the past 14 days, including Hong Kong residents, will be barred from arriving here until further notice.

Top court rules mask ban is constitutional (RTHK, Dec. 21): A five-judge panel at the Court of Final Appeal unanimously ruled that the ban on masks at protests and rallies – whether they are authorised or not – is proportionate and no more than reasonably necessary to prevent violence. It also rejected a challenge by 25 pan-democrats to the constitutionality of the Emergency Regulations Ordinance, under which the mask ban was imposed at the height of the anti-government protests last year.

Media mogul Jimmy Lai charged with foreign collusion (SCMP, Dec. 11): Media tycoon Jimmy Lai is being charged with colluding with foreign powers under the Beijing-imposed national security law, an offence that carries a maximum penalty of life imprisonment. The Post has learned that the charge stems from comments Lai purportedly made on Twitter and in interviews asking foreign countries to sanction the city before and after his arrest in August. Lai is the fourth person so far to be charged under the national security legislation, which outlaws acts of secession, subversion, terrorism and collusion with foreign forces. All three of the previous defendants charged under the law have been denied bail.

When can Hong Kong banks freeze accounts, and should you worry? (SCMP, Dec. 9): The freezing of bank accounts belonging to individuals (former opposition lawmaker Ted Hui and his family) and a church in Hong Kong over last year's anti-government protests has sent a ripple effect through the sector, with critics warning investor confidence may be affected in a city renowned for its position as a financial centre. Both Hui and the church cases stemmed from police's instructions to the banks as part of investigations into allegations of money laundering and misappropriation. The Hong Kong Monetary Authority says mechanisms and legislation in place align with international standards and practices.

Govt to ban night-time dine in, close more venues (RTHK, Dec. 8): Chief Executive Carrie Lam announced a ban on dine-in services at restaurants after 6pm and ordered the closure of venues including gyms and beauty salons as the fourth wave of Covid-19 shows no sign of abating. More civil servants will be told to work from home. She also noted that the current wave of infections is more complicated than the last as the cases are distributed more broadly and involve many clusters.

Wanted in Hong Kong, ex-opposition lawmaker Ted Hui makes exile bid overseas (SCMP, Dec. 4): After arriving in Copenhagen, former opposition lawmaker Ted Hui declares his intention to resettle his family and live in Britain for the near future. He faces charges related to Hong Kong protests, and by leaving the city could push the courts to reconsider bail conditions for other activists awaiting trial. The case is also likely to renew scrutiny of the judiciary, which pro-Beijing figures have accused of showing excessive leniency to members of the opposition.

Various venues to close, gathering limit cut to two (RTHK, Dec. 1): A number of entertainment venues, including theme parks, will be closed and the public gathering limit reduced from four people to two from Dec. 2, as Hong Kong tightens pandemic restrictions amid a surge in coronavirus infections. Chief Executive Carrie Lam also announced that most civil servants will be working from home and appealed to private companies to follow suit. The measures will last for at least two weeks.

Economy/Finance

Gold jewellery sales down 80 per cent (SCMP, Dec. 30): Gold jewellery sales in Hong Kong fell by almost 80 per cent this year as the Covid-19 pandemic spoiled countless wedding parties and other celebrations, according to an industry estimate. The number of marriages in the first 10 months of 2020 fell 40 per cent, dulling demand for gold jewellery, a traditional Chinese gift for newlyweds. The Hong Kong government has imposed a wide range of social distancing rules to contain the spread of the coronavirus, including a restriction of no more than 20 people at weddings.

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About 70 per cent of restaurants face closure amid tough social-distancing measures (SCMP, Dec. 29): About 70 per cent of Hong Kong restaurants polled have said they face closures in the next three months amid tightened social-distancing measures rolled out to contain the Covid-19 pandemic. The Institution of Dining Art said a similar percentage of respondents also planned to lay off staff in the coming quarter. Association chairman Ray Chui said the sector's biggest challenge was the social-distancing measures imposed on catering businesses amid the fourth wave of coronavirus infections.

Hong Kong has a vital role in international trade and global supply chains (SCMP, Dec. 22): Hong Kong has a vital role in international trade and global supply chains as the world's biggest free-trade deal reinforces Asia's status as a global trade and consumption force, according to prominent businessman Victor Fung. The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) is a huge opportunity for Hong Kong as it signals the beginning of a new era in global trade and will help expand and strengthen supply chains in Asia.

Government unveils another round of aid for hard-hit businesses (SCMP, Dec. 18): Businesses struggling to remain afloat during the fourth wave of the coronavirus hammering Hong Kong will receive HK\$6.4 (US\$0.82) billion in a new round of relief after the government reversed its position that the city's strained finances could not afford any further handouts. The subsidy programme will mainly help companies operating in the entertainment, catering, education and beauty and massage sectors, after tighter social-distancing rules kept customers away and sharply eroded their bottom lines.

Jobless rate edges down to 6.3 per cent (SCMP, Dec. 17): Unemployment rate declined marginally in November, to 6.3 per cent, but the government has warned that the city's ongoing fourth wave of coronavirus infections is still putting a strain on job security. The latest unemployment rate was 0.1 percentage point lower than the 6.4 per cent rate recorded in the August-October period, which was a 16-year high.

HK economy won't recover until late 2021 (RTHK, Dec. 7): Financial Secretary Paul Chan said that the city would see a financial deficit for another year amid the coronavirus pandemic. He added that Hong Kong's economy is still facing pressure and might only see a recovery in the latter part of next year at the earliest. The government's financial deficit this year is predicted to exceed US\$38 billion while reserves will drop to US\$102 billion.

Lawmakers kick-start plan for metropolis on artificial islands (SCMP, Dec. 4): Legislature has approved US\$71 million funding request to conduct feasibility studies for building a huge settlement on artificial islands that would be the city's costliest ever infrastructure project. The Lantau Tomorrow Vision, the proposed US\$80 billion scheme, aims to build 1,000 hectares of man-made land in waters east of Lantau Island, and a new transport network, to create from scratch a new Hong Kong business district and housing hub.

Special Focus

Beijing silent on reported changes to Hong Kong's political system (SCMP, Dec. 26): After days of speculation about potential moves to blunt opposition influence, the National People's Congress Standing Committee (NPCSC) concludes its meeting with no mention of the matter. However, sources in both the city and on the mainland say the silence may simply reflect that more time is needed to finalise the proposals. Sources had told the Post that Beijing was mulling a drastic overhaul of Hong Kong's Election Committee by scrapping all 117 seats likely to be controlled by opposition district councillors to quash their influence in the 2022 leadership race. Pro-establishment figures were also lobbying Beijing to get rid of the five so-called super seats in the Legislative Council, which are reserved for district councillors.

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