



South Korea OKs single test for COVID-19 and flu

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — Health officials in South Korea have approved a new test that’s designed to detect both COVID-19 and seasonal influenza from the same samples, which would help prevent disruption at hospitals as the pandemic stretches into the flu season. The country has struggled to stem the spread of the coronavirus, which some experts say could spread more broadly during cold weather when people spend more time indoors. The Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency has reported increased daily new cases of COVID-19. People have been venturing out in public after the government eased social distancing restrictions in October to support a weak economy. “Despite efforts by health authorities to trace contacts and suppress transmissions, such efforts have been outpaced by the speed of viral spread,” senior Health Ministry official Yoon Taeho said. The new test, which targets genes that are specific to both COVID-19 and seasonal flu, is an evolved version of PCR tests that are used to detect COVID-19 from samples taken from noses or throats. Laboratories use machines to amplify genetic materials so tiny quantities of the virus are detected. The illnesses are hard to tell apart by their symptoms, so having a diagnosis for both in three to six hours “would be convenient for patients and also reduce the burden of medical workers,” Yoon said.

China’s manufacturing accelerates in November

BEIJING (AP) — China’s manufacturing activity accelerated in November as its rebound from the pandemic gained strength, a survey shows, while the United States and Europe struggle with rising infections and renewed controls on business. The monthly purchasing managers’ index issued by the state statistics agency and an industry group rose to 52.1 on a 100-point scale on which numbers above 50 show an expansion. That was up from October’s 51.4. Business conditions have largely returned to normal since the ruling Communist Party declared the outbreak that began in southwestern China under control in March. Factories, stores, and offices have reopened, though restrictions on visitors entering the country remain. Retail spending, auto sales, factory output, and other activity have rebounded to above pre-pandemic levels. “The pace of economic growth picked up in November on the back of a broad-based improvement in both services and manufacturing,” Julian Evans-Pritchard of Capital Economics said in a report. In November, an indicator of factory production rose to 54.7 from October’s 53.9, the National Bureau of Statistics and the China Federation of Logistics & Purchasing reported. The new orders index rose 1.1 points to 53.9. The measure of new exports rose to 51.5 from the previous month’s 51.0. Chinese exporters have benefitted from the relatively early reopening of their economy and demand for masks and other medical supplies. They are taking market share from foreign competitors that still face anti-virus restrictions. Employment contracted again in November but at a slower pace. The employment index gained 0.2 points to 49.5.

Walmart sells majority stake in Japanese Seiyu supermarket

TOKYO (AP) — U.S. retailer Walmart is selling off 85% of its wholly owned Japanese supermarket subsidiary Seiyu, while retaining a 15% stake, in a deal valued at \$1.6 billion, the companies said. KKR & Co., a global investment firm, will purchase a 65% stake, while Japanese online retailer Rakuten will acquire a 20% stake from Walmart, a statement said. KKR and Rakuten will bring their expertise in e-commerce and global digital marketing to strengthen Seiyu in the increasingly digital shopping age, according to the statement. Seiyu chief Lionel Desclee will continue to lead in the transition period, after which he will take on a new role at Walmart, the world’s biggest retailer. A board will be set up, made up of representatives from KKR, Rakuten, and Walmart, and a new CEO appointed, the companies said. The transaction, subject to regulatory approval, is expected to close in the first quarter of 2021. Bentonville, Arkansas-based Walmart, which also runs stores in Europe and other parts of Asia, entered the Japanese market with its purchase of a small stake in Seiyu in 2002, promising to bring its “every day low price” to Japan. Seiyu became Walmart’s group company in 2008. The Japanese retail market has often proved a challenge for foreign players, and Walmart’s arrival was met with skepticism from the start. Japanese buyers tend to be finicky and have at times shunned products viewed as cheap or of poor quality. But that trend has rapidly changed, and discount stores are increasingly popular as more Japanese seek out bargains. The other hot trend all over the world is the move toward online shopping, a shift that’s accelerated amid the coronavirus pandemic.

China demands India rescind app ban

BEIJING (AP) — China has demanded India rescind a ban on more Chinese mobile phone apps amid tension between Beijing and other governments over technology and security. A foreign ministry spokesman accused India of violating global free-trade rules and discriminating against Chinese companies. India announced a ban on 43 apps, many of them Chinese. It said they threaten India’s “sovereignty and integrity” but gave no details. That came on top of earlier bans on Chinese apps including popular video service TikTok. “The Indian side should immediately correct this discriminatory practice so as to avoid causing greater damage to the cooperation between the two sides,” said the spokesman, Zhao Lijian. Zhao called on India to “safeguard the legitimate rights and interests” of Chinese companies but gave no indication whether Beijing might retaliate. The United States and some other governments also have expressed concern about whether Chinese apps might be gathering too much sensitive information about their users.



HELPING HANDS. Keeping Hope Alive volunteer Mark Yuen, a trained hairdresser, provides a free haircut to an elderly man in the corridor of a rental flat building in Singapore. Members of the volunteer group conduct weekend door-to-door visits to deliver goods or provide services to people in need. (AP Photo/Ee Ming Toh)

Volunteers spend Sundays to help Singapore’s less fortunate

By Ee Ming Toh
The Associated Press

SINGAPORE — Fion Phua has been volunteering for so long, she is nicknamed Robin Hood for her efforts helping the poor. Singapore’s partial lockdown as the coronavirus was spreading in April left her fretting over how the blind, bedridden, and elderly living alone would cope.

She had to stop her volunteer activities for a month, but Phua decided to keep going in May with visits every two weeks. Her core team of volunteers met urgent needs — plumbers, handymen, and people who could dispense medicine or tap on government resources.

“We support social distancing, not social isolation,” Phua said.

The informal network she founded, Keeping Hope Alive, has toiled tirelessly for over two decades to reach Singapore’s less fortunate in different neighborhoods. Its model is built on people offering their time and unique skills rather than donating money.

They had resumed their weekly visits, and on a recent Sunday morning, suited up in personal protective gear, masks, and face shields despite the tropical heat. Then small teams fanned out to knock on doors at the Henderson rental flats.

Once the residents’ most-pressing needs were identified, the volunteers acted immediately — installing bicycle bells on wheelchairs, trimming nails, cleaning bed bug-infested homes, and checking if household items need replacement.

Trained hairdresser Mark Yuen, 65, is one of the volunteers. “To some people, a haircut is more than beauty and hygiene, it also provides comfort. It makes one feel that they are not alone ... that someone cares,” he said.

An array of donated items was arranged for distribution to the residents — rice, cooking oil, eggs, boxes of fresh produce, vitamins, and children’s toys. Residents eagerly queued to stock up on essentials or eyed big-ticket items like washing machines, hospital beds, and sofas.

One resident’s refrigerator broke down a month ago. Volunteers verified her situation, then carted a new fridge straight to her kitchen and provided a stash of supermarket vouchers, garlic, onions, and vegetables. As a gesture of thanks, she made tea for the volunteers.

“I felt happy and very appreciative as they helped me. It is hard as I am the only person working and my salary is 1,300 (Singapore dollars). I need to pay the house bills and my son needs study materials,” Sukkuriya Beevi, a 51-year old cleaner from India, said.

During Singapore’s partial lockdown, senior centric-activities were suspended to protect vulnerable elderly. Phua’s network handed out donated smartphones and taught the recipients how to video call and access government services online.

They were overjoyed to see their loved ones through the screen, even if they couldn’t hug, Phua recalled. “In this digital world, it’s a new form of caring, a new form of love ... It’s cyberlove,” she said.

Phua hopes during a crisis like the coronavirus pandemic that people retain their sense of empathy.

“COVID will not be over in one, two days and not one, two months, even not one, two years. So we ought to adjust our living lifestyle so that we look after the weak, the poor, the sick, and people who are in depression and are unable to find a solution to it. We ought to be

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Asian Currency Exchange Rates

Units per U.S. dollar as of 12/04

| | |
|-------------------|--------|
| Bangladesh Taka | 84.11 |
| Cambodian Riel | 4046.8 |
| China Renminbi | 6.5301 |
| Fijian Dollar | 2.0325 |
| Hong Kong Dollar | 7.7505 |
| Indian Rupee | 73.785 |
| Indonesian Rupiah | 14085 |
| Iranian Rial | 42025 |
| Japanese Yen | 104.13 |
| Laos New Kip | 9275.9 |
| Malaysian Ringgit | 4.058 |
| Nepal Rupee | 118.6 |
| Pakistani Rupee | 159.31 |
| Papua N.G. Kina | 3.52 |
| Philippine Peso | 48.079 |
| Russian Ruble | 73.91 |
| Saudi Riyal | 3.7509 |
| Singapore Dollar | 1.3331 |
| South Korean Won | 1084.5 |
| Sri Lankan Rupee | 185.65 |
| Taiwan Dollar | 28.204 |
| Thai Baht | 30.15 |
| Vietnam Dong | 23221 |