

# WORLD

## Travel lane brings relief for families kept apart

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After nearly two years of being stuck in Malaysia, Fazal Bahardeen, a Singaporean businessman, is grateful that he can finally go home to see his family.

Singapore and Malaysia were opening a quarantine-free travel lane at their land border crossing on Monday, and Fazal is among the thousands who are rushing to book bus tickets online, allowing him to cross the border, closed since March last year.

The opening of the vaccinated travel lane, or VTL, for land border crossing coincides with the opening of the same facility for air travel between Singapore and the Malaysian capital, Kuala Lumpur.

Before the pandemic, the Johor-Singapore Causeway was one of the world's busiest border crossings, with more than 350,000 travelers passing through the area every day.

Fazal was one of these travelers between his home in the southern Malaysian state of Johor and his Singapore-based travel consultancy firm.

"The first group of travelers who will want to take advantage of the VTL are those who are coming home for family reunions," he said.

The VTL is only the first step toward restoring pre-pandemic travel between the two countries, industry executives and analysts said.

"The VTL is not expected to restore that flow immediately, as the VTL is not designed at present for frequent travel," said Walter Theseira, associate professor of economics at the Singapore University of Social Sciences. "There is a quota limit, and an antigen rapid test is still required before travel."

The main aim of the VTL is to facilitate family reunions and business visits, but not daily work travel across the land border, and opening the border will entail some public health risk, Theseira said. However, this can be mitigated by the fact that the VTL is open to a limited number of travelers and authorized vehicles, and requires COVID-19 testing.

The VTL was to start on Monday with an initial quota of 1,500 daily travelers. They must present digital proof that they are full vaccinated and must test negative in an antigen rapid test or a polymerase chain reaction test within two days before departure. Only Malaysian and Singaporean citizens and permanent residents as well as holders of a Malaysian or Singaporean long-term pass are allowed to travel via the VTL.

Singapore is requiring travelers from Malaysia to take an antigen rapid test on arrival. The Singapore Ministry of Trade and Industry announced this new requirement on Sunday after the discovery of the potentially more contagious Omicron variant.

Singapore is also watching the new coronavirus variant closely and may be forced to roll back the easing up of safety measures as it moves forward to tackle the disease, said Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong on Sunday.

In his first public comments about Omicron, Lee, who was speaking at the People's Action Party convention, said Singapore must be mentally prepared for "more bumps along the road" as it deals with an evolving virus.

Because of the two countries' proximity, their shared history, family connections and cultural affinity their economies have long been intertwined.

Aarathi Arumugam, president of the Malaysian Association in Singapore, welcomed the VTL, saying low-income workers will benefit most from land travel, given the high cost of air travel.

Alexander Yee, managing director of Nasalis Larvatus Tours, a tour operator in Malaysia, said: "Many have been separated from their loved ones since the movement control orders were implemented, which restricted movement in and out between Malaysia and Singapore."

Singapore is one of Malaysia's biggest export markets, accounting for about 14 percent of annual export revenue.

## Torrent of trouble



Residents wade through floodwaters following a storm in the Indonesian city of Bandung on Sunday.  
TIMUR MATAHARI / AFP

## Tough lines highlight challenges in Vienna

### US, Iran signal compromise may be hard to find as nuclear talks resume

By **LIU XUAN**  
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Talks aimed at reviving the Iran nuclear deal resume on Monday, but the language from the key players, Iran and the United States, suggests any breakthroughs in Vienna will be hard won, experts say.

Though the adversaries have expressed a willingness to reconcile key differences related to a 2015 nuclear deal, their demands heading into the negotiations are still "not much different" from those expressed in the earlier rounds of the process, said Niu Song, a professor at the Middle East Studies Institute of Shanghai International Studies University.

Iran wants the US to lift economic sanctions so that the Islamic republic can normalize its foreign trade, while the US wants to further restrict Iran's nuclear activities, he said.

Representatives from China, Russia, France, Germany, Britain, and Iran are gathering in the Austrian capital to restart the talks in an effort to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, with the indirect involvement of the US, which withdrew from the deal in 2018.

The 2015 pact was struck on the basis of Iran curbing its nuclear program in exchange for an easing in economic sanctions imposed on the country.

Even as the talks in Vienna went through six rounds without meaningful results, Niu said Iran and the US "have maintained intermittent dialogue and expectations for a

new round of nuclear talks."

"It reflects the willingness of the two sides to advance the resolution of Iranian nuclear issues," he said. "This is the most important prerequisite for substantive progress."

Though the two countries have committed to the resumed talks, they have kept up a steady criticism of each other, Niu said.

Saeed Khatibzadeh, a spokesperson for Iran's Foreign Ministry, said last week that his country will not keep open the window for negotiations "if the JCPOA does not imply specific economic interests and the normalization of foreign trade for the Islamic republic".

Khatibzadeh said the lifting of the sanctions was the most important issue in the talks that are about to start.

#### Interim deal

US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan raised the possibility of an interim deal in a recent meeting with his Israeli counterpart Eyal Hulata, arguing that such an arrangement would let the parties "buy more time for nuclear negotiations".

The proposal, in the eyes of some experts, was aimed at putting the brakes on Iran's advancements in its nuclear program, such as a freeze on the enrichment of uranium to 60 percent purity, in exchange for the release of some of Iran's frozen funds, Xinhua News Agency reported.

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said on Nov 20 that if Iran "isn't

willing to engage seriously, Washington will look at all the options necessary to keep the US secure".

Hossein Askari, an Iranian economist and emeritus professor of business and international affairs at George Washington University, said in an interview with Iran's Mehr News Agency that a full agreement may be out of reach given the changing situation. "A partial agreement may be better than nothing" for the US, said Askari, referring to Sullivan's proposal.

Niu said that even as the US and Iran engage in the indirect negotiations in Vienna, fierce exchanges between them may yet materialize while the parties gather. The negotiations resuming this week are the first since Ebrahim Raisi became Iran's president in August.

The Raisi administration, which is generally regarded as holding a tough attitude toward the US, "is unlikely to achieve a clear breakthrough" with the US in its first nuclear talks, Niu said.

Niu also noted the resistance toward a deal in Vienna among some quarters in Iran and the US.

"The outcome of this round of nuclear talks will, to a large extent, evolve into a clearer statement and description of their respective positions between the Joe Biden administration of the US and the Raisi administration of Iran."

China, one of the strongest advocates of the talks, will "urge the US and Iran to resolve differences through negotiations and effectively manage conflicts" while supporting Iran to safeguard its legitimate rights and interests, Niu said.

*Xinhua contributed to this story.*

## World Bank calls for vaccine equality

By **YIFAN XU** in Washington  
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The pandemic and poverty together pose huge challenges to the world, David Malpass, president of the World Bank Group, says.

"As we look at it, developing countries are facing a shortage of vaccines," Malpass said in an arm-chair discussion hosted by the Center for Security and International Study last week.

Inflation is also problematic for people in poorer countries, he said. "The supply chain issues are dominant in the discussions with world leaders. And so that's a big challenge of how you get this global recovery back on track."

The vaccine was a topic of focus for Malpass, who said that despite commitments by wealthy countries, a significant disparity in the availability of vaccines between the developed and developing world persists. Only 20 percent of people in low- and lower-middle-income countries have received a first vaccine dose, compared with 80 percent in high- or upper-middle-income countries.

Malpass urged advanced economies, including the United States, to speed up the delivery of COVID-19 vaccines to developing countries, particularly those in Africa waiting for doses to save lives. There have been instances in which the governments of donor countries have announced donations without saying which type of dose was being given, making it hard for the beneficiary to plan because different types of vaccines need different kits.

"We're really at a point where we're trying to get deliveries in November, December, January and February because that can really save lives, especially in Africa, where vaccination rates are low," Malpass said.

Referring to World Bank tracking data aimed at helping to reduce poverty and increase litera-

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backward. There's not really an ability to do distance learning for kids in general, but especially in poor countries."

**David Malpass**, president of the World Bank Group



cy, Malpass said one of the critical indicators for the world's future was whether 10-year-olds could read a basic story. Figures showed that 70 percent of children in poorer countries could not read a basic story because they have been kept out of school for about 18 months, he said.

"The data is really clear that the kids just go backward. There's not really an ability to do distance learning for kids in general, but especially in poor countries. So, we are — I'm also talking in all these meetings about the need for more resources for — especially for low-income countries, but in general for developing countries."

The World Bank needs resources from the International Development Agency to solve this problem, he said.

"So you're able to take money from the US, or from Europe, from Japan, the bigger donors. China is a donor to the IDA."

"We do work around the world in other developing countries to try to improve their private-sector activity, to try to work with them on better governance structures. All of that's going on. But it takes more resources than what's available."

## Deadly accident



Debris lies scattered after a bus crashed into a house in the central Mexican town of Joquicingo on Friday. At least 19 people were killed, with 32 injured, when the vehicle's brakes failed, an official said. FERNANDO RAMIREZ / XINHUA

## Afghan leader reaffirms wish for friendly ties while seeking aid

By **XU WEIWEI** in Hong Kong  
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Afghanistan will seek good relations with other countries, the acting prime minister said in an address that sought to ease concerns abroad about Taliban control while appealing for humanitarian assistance.

Mullah Hassan Akhund, in his first televised speech as the most senior leader in the country's interim administration, on Saturday said: "The Islamic Emirate wants to have good relations, economic ties and coexist with all countries."

Speaking on Radio Television of Afghanistan, Hassan Akhund added: "Afghanistan will not interfere in internal affairs of any country, it is not our policy."

He said the new administration will not allow anyone to use Afghan soil to commit acts against another country.

Responding to concerns expressed since the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August, the acting prime minister spoke of the government's aim to protect the

rights of women.

"The Islamic Emirate respects the rights of education for women and girls," Hassan Akhund said. Women will be provided with their own space for their studies based on Islamic laws, he said.

Hassan Akhund also urged the international community to restore humanitarian assistance to the war-ravaged country.

"We ask all the international charity organizations to not withhold their aid and to help our exhausted nation ... so that the problems of the people can be solved," Hassan said.

Afghanistan, which has relied on foreign aid for decades, has been experiencing rising inflation and unemployment and its banking sector is struggling. Adding to the strains is that the United States has yet to unfreeze about \$10 billion of assets held in its reserves on behalf of Kabul.

Afghan Foreign Ministry spokesman Abdul Qahar Balkhi said a delegation led by acting Foreign Minister Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi has been in the Qatari capital

Doha since Friday for talks with US officials. The discussions were due to end on Monday.

The Taliban-led administration has repeatedly asked the US to unfreeze the Afghan assets, and to not attach political issues to humanitarian aid. Muttaqi wrote an open letter to the US Congress about the assets. The details of the letter were released on Nov 17.

"The fundamental challenge of our people is financial security and the roots of this concern lead back to the freezing of the assets of our people by the American government," he said in the letter.

A report released by the United Nations World Food Program last month said that more than half of Afghanistan's population of 22.8 million people were facing acute food insecurity. Some 3.2 million children aged under 5 are expected to suffer from acute malnutrition by the end of this year.

"The world owed its support to ensure that they (the people of Afghanistan) can live in a peaceful and stable environment after years of constant conflict," Pakistani

Prime Minister Imran Khan told a meeting of the Apex Committee of the Afghanistan Inter-Ministerial Coordination Cell in Islamabad on Nov 22.

An official document said that Khan "ordered an immediate shipment of in-kind humanitarian assistance worth 5 billion Pakistani rupees (\$28.5 million), which will comprise food commodities including 50,000 metric tons of wheat, emergency medical supplies, winter shelters, and other supplies" to Afghanistan.

Pakistan approved a reduction in tariffs and sales tax that had been applied on imports from Afghanistan, and instructed authorities to restore bus services between the city of Peshawar and Jalalabad across the border.

Pakistani Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry said a corridor had been approved for supplies of food aid coming from India. "We think the people in Afghanistan should be helped in any way on humanitarian grounds," Chaudhry said.

Salman Bashir, a former foreign secretary of Pakistan and former

ambassador to China, called the approval "exceptional".

"This is a major gesture, given the fact that (Pakistan's) relations with India are at the lowest ebb," he said.

Bashir said Pakistan hopes the urgency of the situation will not be lost on Western countries, which "have a moral obligation to assist the people of Afghanistan at this juncture".

Political prejudices and preferences "should not override the urgent considerations of averting famine and a grave humanitarian disaster in Afghanistan", he said.

Imtiaz Gul, executive director of the Center for Research and Security Studies in Pakistan, said his country has been "doing whatever it could to facilitate Afghanistan and its people after having hosted over 3 million refugees until 2015 and 2016".

The US-led freezing of assets and halting of international financial transactions with Afghanistan have put the economy under extreme pressure, the scholar said.

*Xinhua contributed to the report.*