



A Syrian medic ties a mask on a displaced Syrian boy as he gives instructions about the dangers of the spread of coronavirus and distributes masks in a camp for displaced people near the Syrian town of Batabu in Syria's rebel-held northwestern Idlib province yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

EU chief hopes for coronavirus vaccine this year

AFP, Brussels

The president of the European Commission said yesterday that, after speaking to a German biotech firm, she hopes a vaccine against the novel coronavirus strain will be available this year.

Brussels' top official Ursula von der Leyen has held talks with executives from CureVac, a company that has received an offer of 80 million euros (\$88 million) in EU financial support for its research.

"They are working on a promising technology to develop a vaccine against the coronavirus," the former German defence minister said in an online video message shortly before she was to join talks with the 27 EU leaders.

"The European Union is providing them up to 80 million euros and I hope that with this support we can have a vaccine on the market, perhaps before autumn. This could save lives in Europe and in the rest of the world too."

On Monday, CureVac denied newspaper reports that US President Donald Trump had offered to pay for exclusive rights to a coronavirus vaccine, and the German government says it has "dealt with" the situation.

There is as yet no vaccine against the novel strain of coronavirus that emerged in China last year and has in recent weeks become a fast-moving pandemic across 145 countries and territories.

Chile and Peru close borders

Latam grounds flights over pandemic

AFP, Montevideo

Chile and Peru announced a total closure of their borders on Monday while Latin America's largest airline said it was reducing operations by 70 percent as the region scrambled to stem the rapidly-spreading coronavirus pandemic.

Latin America has registered more than 800 cases and seven deaths, according to an AFP count, after the Dominican Republic became the latest nation to report a fatality.

"We've decided to close all our country's terrestrial, maritime and aerial borders for the transit of foreigners," said Chile's President Sebastian Pinera.

The announcement came as Chile revealed on Monday its number of coronavirus cases had more than doubled since Sunday to 155.

Peru followed suit soon afterwards with President Martin Vizcarra announcing a two-week border closure from midnight, while Colombia announced it would close its borders until May 30.

Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Paraguay confirmed partial border closures. Paraguay also imposed overnight curfews.

Four killed

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village market as yesterday was a market day.

As yesterday was hot, some of them were standing in the shade of the gate when its top part collapsed, he said.

"We have visited the spot. We will investigate the incident," said Tarash Upazila Nirbahi Officer Ifat Jahan. Despite repeated attempts, this correspondent could not contact the college authorities over phone.

Local lawmaker Abdul Aziz visited the spot and the victims' houses.

Police stations pass buck

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Kajol's disappearance came a day after Saifuzzaman Shikhor -- a ruling party lawmaker from Magura-1 -- filed a case against him, Editor-in-chief of daily Manabzamin Matiuir Rahman Chowdhury, and 30 others on charge of publishing a report with "false information" and circulating it on social media.

Kajol's family suspects that he was abducted, and has been repeatedly urging authorities to help ensure his safe return.

On March 11, the family filed a missing general diary with

Chawkbazar Police Station in this connection.

Sub-inspector Abdul Lokman of Chawkbazar Police Station, who is investigating the general diary, told The Daily Star, "We saw in the CCTV footage obtained from his office that he was going out on his motorcycle."

"Since the area is under New Market Police Station, we asked the family to file a case with them," he told The Daily Star.

"But we are investigating and will inform you if anything comes up," he added.

Contacted SM Kaiyum, officer-in-

charge of New Market Police Station, said, "Nothing happened in the area under my jurisdiction. He left his office but did not return home, which is under Chawkbazar Police Station." "This is why the family has to file the case with that station and they will take necessary action in this regard," he added.

Several national and international rights bodies, including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, have urged the government to locate Kajol immediately.

Kajol also worked for different national dailies as a photojournalist.

Benefit of freedom must be shared

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issues including the possibility of joint flood control and greater economic cooperation between the two states. The two prime ministers also discuss at length on issues of world peace, especially in Asia, and advocate neutrality of the Indian Ocean to prevent big power politics in the area.

The joint declaration by India and Bangladesh will be made tomorrow. It will cover economic, political and other aspects of Indo-Bangladesh relations, according to official sources. The Declaration will simultaneously be issued from Dhaka and Delhi, and the document will be in Bangla and Hindi. The two prime ministers advise their officials to keep red tape to the minimum to implement the decisions expeditiously.

INDIRA ADDRESSES

CIVIC RECEPTION

Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi

expresses her confidence that Bangladesh will be able to progress and prosper in the same spirit the country was able to consolidate her freedom. Speaking at a civic reception given in her honour at the Bangabhaban's lush green lawn, the Indian prime minister refers to Bangladesh's freedom struggle and says that she has never seen such a movement. The entire people rose to a man and fought for liberation. "Although Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was many miles away from you, his spirit guided you. No power could cow you down. The freedom movement was sustained by his spirit," she adds.

Describing Dhaka as "the city of freedom," Indira Gandhi says that the freedom must be meaningful. The benefit of freedom must be shared by all people.

JEDDAH MISSION REJECTED

Bangabandhu has rejected the move

of the six-nation mission appointed by the recent Islamic Conference at Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, to visit Bangladesh. The Jeddah Conference held earlier this month appointed the mission to visit Pakistan and Bangladesh and bring about conciliation between Bangabandhu and Bhutto.

ARRANGEMENT OF RICE SUPPLY FROM BURMA FINALISED
A Bangladesh government spokesman says that arrangements have been finalised with Burma for supply of rice to meet the immediate food shortage of the country. This, coupled with supplies from India, he hopes, would enable the government to get over the critical period of April and May.

SOURCES: March 19, 1972 issues of Dainik Bangla, The Daily Ittefaq, Azad, Morning News, The Bangladesh Observer and Purbodesh.

Oldest 'mammoth house'

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measuring 41 feet across.

In the 1960s and '70s, researchers found similar, smaller buildings at the site, which they dubbed Kostenki 11. It is 310 miles south of Moscow and now home to a museum, the State Archaeological Museum-Reserve Kostenki.

In 2014, researchers found evidence of this structure at the site and began excavation in 2015, which took three years. A study detailing their findings published this week in the journal Antiquity.

These mammoth bone structures, dating to the Ice Age, have been found across Eastern Europe. But until now, the oldest ones found were dated to 22,000 years ago.

Based on previous discoveries, researchers believe they were constructed by Palaeolithic people to serve as houses, providing refuge during harsh winters. Ice Age winters likely had lows reaching negative four degrees Fahrenheit.

And constructing something this massive out of hundreds of mammoth bones would have taken time. It's surprising, considering that populations of hunter-gatherers never spent much time in one location.

"Mammoth bones are very heavy, and building the circular structure represents a huge investment of time and energy by the humans that built this," said Alexander Pryor, lead study author and Palaeolithic archaeologist at the University of Exeter.

The bones formed a continuous circle, with no obvious entrance, according to the study. So far, the researchers have identified 51 mammoth mandibles and 64 skulls, the researchers said.

Inside the circle, the researchers also found the first evidence that wood was burned inside it. But overall, there are no signs of long-term habitation inside the structure.

The researchers believe that it didn't act as a wintertime refuge, which has them rethinking the purpose of these massive, time-consuming structures.

"It clearly meant something to them, and there was very likely a ritual element to it, even if the structure ultimately had some sort of practical purpose too," Pryor said.

3 schools defy govt directive

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coronavirus.

Yesterday morning, the authorities of Bangladesh Rice Research Institute High School and Bangladesh Rice Research Institute Pragati Primary School cut a 100-pound cake in the presence of several hundred students and their guardians, marking Bangabandhu's birth centenary.

"All students and many of their guardians were asked to join the cake-cutting ceremony though the government instructed them to keep the schools closed," one of the guardians told our Gazipur correspondent.

"There were no hand washing arrangements and many of the students were without masks," added the guardian.

Asked, Belayat Hossain, head

teacher of Pragati Primary School, said the programme was chalked out much before the government announcement.

"We concluded the programme within a short time," he added.

Gazipur District Education Officer Rebeka Sultana said the school authorities held the programme as they received the instructions on school closure late.

"But they didn't do the right thing. We will take action after investigating the matter," she added.

Meanwhile, the authorities of Narayanganj High School and College held programmes, cut a cake and planted trees with the participation of several hundred students, reports our Narayanganj correspondent.

US, China trade barbs over coronavirus

AFP, Beijing

A spat between the US and China over the novel coronavirus escalated yesterday as President Donald Trump angered Beijing by referring to the pathogen as the "Chinese Virus."

The two countries have sparred over the origin of the virus for days, with a Chinese official promoting conspiracy theories claiming it was brought to China by the US army and American officials using terms seen as stigmatising a nation.

"The United States will be powerfully supporting those industries, like Airlines and others, that are particularly affected by the Chinese Virus," Trump tweeted Monday night.

Trump's allies had previously referred to the pandemic as the "Chinese coronavirus".

Beijing said yesterday it was "strongly indignant" over the phrase, which it called "a kind of stigmatisation".

The United States should "immediately stop its unjustified accusations against China," foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang told reporters.

A commentary by the official Xinhua news agency said using "racist and xenophobic names to cast blame for the outbreak on other countries can only reveal politicians' irresponsibility and incompetence which will intensify virus fears".

The war of words reignited

diplomatic tensions between the two countries, which have tussled over trade and other disputes since Trump took office.

Trump's comments were criticised inside the US, with warnings it could incite a backlash against the Asian-American community.

"Our Asian-American communities -- people YOU serve -- are already suffering. They don't need you fueling more bigotry," tweeted New York city mayor Bill de Blasio, whose state is one of the hardest-hit by the virus in the US.

The World Health Organization said more cases and deaths had been reported in the rest of the world than in China.

The new coronavirus virus was first detected late last year, with China's own health officials initially saying its source was a live animal market in the central city of Wuhan, whose government had initially tried to cover up the outbreak.

But China has sought to distance itself from the virus, saying the origin is still unknown, while seeking global goodwill by offering aid to countries facing serious outbreaks.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, in a phone call he initiated with top Chinese official Yang Jiechi, voiced anger that Beijing has used official channels "to shift blame for COVID-19 to the United States," the State Department said.

2016 ELECTION MEDDLING

US drops case against Russian firm

AFP, Washington

The US Justice Department abruptly dropped its criminal case Monday against the company controlled by a confidant of Russian President Vladimir Putin that allegedly funded the campaign to meddle in the 2016 elections.

Just weeks before the trial was to begin, the Justice department announced it was withdrawing the eight-count indictment of Concord Management and Consulting, a company owned by close Putin ally Yevgeniy Prigozhin.

Concord, which funds the St. Petersburg-based troll factory the Internet Research Agency, was part of an indictment against 13 Russian individuals and three companies -- one of the major outcomes of Special Counsel Robert Mueller's 22-month investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 vote.

The Internet Research Agency, Mueller charged, actively pumped disinformation, memes and fake news into social media through false accounts to influence US voters and tilt the election four years ago to help President Donald Trump.

Like Mueller, US intelligence chiefs

concluded that the Concord-run operation was one half of a sweeping campaign overseen by Putin -- the other half was hacking by Russian intelligence -- to help Trump and hurt his rival, Democrat Hillary Clinton.

In a filing in Washington federal district court, the Justice Department said that Concord's tactics of trying to use US law and court procedure to pry out classified intelligence related to the evidence against it was a threat to national security.

"The government has concluded that further proceedings as to Concord, a Russian company with no presence in the United States and no exposure to meaningful punishment in the event of conviction, promotes neither the interests of justice nor the nation's security," it said.

Concord was the only one of 25 Russians and three Russian companies charged by Mueller to be brought to trial. The rest are considered out of reach of US law, but the charges against them -- including Prigozhin -- remain in place.

The Justice Department said recent rules changes regarding evidence based on classified US intelligence made it harder to proceed in the case without exposing secrets.

Israel spy agency joins anti-virus fight

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's internal security agency Shin Bet yesterday confirmed it has been mandated to collect information about citizens to fight the spread of the deadly coronavirus, a task it was undertaking with "immediate" effect.

The measure was declared by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu late on Monday under emergency regulations, after a parliamentary committee tasked with green-lighting the move refused to give it final approval, saying it needed more time.

The government "authorised the Shin Bet to put its advanced technologies in the service of the national effort to reduce the spread of coronavirus," a Shin Bet statement said yesterday.

A Shin Bet spokesperson separately told AFP that the policy has taken "immediate" effect.

Involving the spy agency in the fight against coronavirus sets "a dangerous precedent", according to Tehilla Shwartz Altshuler of the Israel Democracy Institute (IDI), speaking before the emergency regulations.

In the Shin Bet statement, agency chief Nadav Argaman said the agency was approached by the health ministry to help track coronavirus carriers "after it emerged that other authorities in the state do not have the necessary technologies".

"The Shin Bet is aware this is a task that goes beyond its routine anti-terror activities, therefore the request was discussed with and approved by the attorney general, with oversight and regulating mechanisms established," Argaman said.

Netanyahu's office refused to provide details about the monitoring techniques to be used.

But copies of the emergency regulations leaked to Israeli media showed that police would be able to retrieve location data of coronavirus carriers as well as quarantined people from phone companies, without a

court order.

The Shin Bet would also be able to use the location data of coronavirus carriers for the 14 days preceding their diagnosis "to identify their routes and the people with whom they came in contact with," the leaked copy of the decision said.

Argaman said the information would be given to the health ministry and not saved by the Shin Bet.

He stressed that given the severity of the crisis Shin Bet had a responsibility to use its "unique skills" to help contain the pandemic.

Netanyahu had on Saturday said he wanted "technologies used in the war against terror" deployed against the COVID-19 disease.

India

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the government had put too many conditions to test a person in a government facility, and as a result, capacity of government facilities were underutilised.

Coronavirus has so far caused three deaths in the country and infected at least 126 people. Many experts fear the number of infected people may be much higher, but the government has simply failed to detect them because of its limited testing.

The Indian government has restricted coronavirus tests to only those with recent travel history to affected countries or those known to have come in contact with confirmed cases as well as with symptoms of the disease.

Coronavirus testing is currently of two types: blood-based and swab based. While the blood-based test is expected to cost around Rs 700, the swab-based one could cost around Rs 6,000. Officials said that the government should regulate the cost of testing if private labs are roped in as the costs are still high as the volumes are still low.