

**CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC**

**LATEST STUDIES**

**COVID-19 antibody tests not backed by solid data**

Studies assessing the accuracy of COVID-19 antibody tests had major shortcomings, an analysis released on Thursday found, indicating that existing research does not prove the tests can confirm with certainty whether people have been infected with the novel coronavirus. Cochrane, a British-based journal that reviews research evidence, looked at 54 studies that sought to measure the reliability of the antibody blood tests. The studies were often small, did not use the most reliable methods, and their results were often incomplete, the analysis found. The analyzed studies looked at nearly 16,000 blood samples, 89% of which had a high risk of bias because patients were unlikely to match the general population.

**Greater risk for pregnant women**

Pregnant women face an increased risk of severe coronavirus infections, a US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study released on Thursday showed. Pregnant women with COVID-19 are 50% more likely to need intensive care and 70% more likely to be put on mechanical ventilators than non-pregnant women, although pregnant women did not have a higher risk of death, CDC researchers reported in the agency's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. Earlier in the pandemic, researchers in China and Britain reported no extra risk for pregnant women.

**Coronavirus traces found in Spanish sewage in March 2019**

Spanish researchers have found traces of the novel coronavirus in Barcelona wastewater collected in March 2019, nine months before COVID-19 was identified in the Chinese city of Wuhan. University of Barcelona virologists led by Albert Bosch had been monitoring wastewater since April of this year. When they decided to test older samples, they said they found genetic material from the virus in one sample from March 12, 2019. The presence of the virus genome so early in Spain, if confirmed, would indicate the pathogen appeared much earlier than previously thought.

**Flu vaccine might have saved some elderly in US**

COVID-19 death rates may be lower in communities where large proportions of elderly residents received flu vaccines, based on data from more than 2,000 counties around the United States. Researchers found that a 10% increase in vaccination coverage among people older than 65 was associated on average with a 28% decrease in the COVID-19 death rate in a given county.

SOURCE: AFP



This long-exposure picture taken early yesterday shows a man using a cell phone while walking past buildings destroyed by prior bombardment in the town of Ariha in Syria's rebel-held northwestern Idlib province, as the Milky Way galaxy is seen in the night sky above.

PHOTO: AFP

**Swarms of locusts reach Delhi outskirts, govt issues advisory**

Swarms of crop-destroying desert locusts have entered the outskirts of Delhi after being spotted in several parts of Haryana's Gurugram district earlier yesterday. With locusts covering the sky in Gurugram, the Haryana government has issued a high alert with officials saying that all necessary measures have been taken, including deploying tractor-mounted spraying facilities, according to news agency PTI. Delhi Environment Minister Gopal Rai on Saturday called an emergency meeting to discuss the situation. The minister also directed the administration to be alert.

**US restricts visas for Chinese officials over Hong Kong**

The United States said Friday it was restricting visas for a number of Chinese officials, accusing them of infringing on the autonomy of Hong Kong. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the United States would restrict visas for unspecified current and former officials of the Chinese Communist Party "who were responsible for eviscerating Hong Kong's freedoms." The officials who were targeted were "responsible for, or complicit in, undermining Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy," which Beijing promised before regaining control of the territory in 1997, Pompeo said.

**Russia offered Afghan militants bounties to kill US troops: NYT**

US intelligence has concluded that the Russian military offered bounties to Taliban-linked militants in Afghanistan to kill American troops and other coalition forces, the New York Times reported on Friday. Citing officials briefed on the matter, the Times said the United States determined months ago that a Russian military intelligence unit linked to assassination attempts in Europe had offered rewards for successful attacks last year. Islamist militants, or armed criminal elements closely associated with them, are believed to have collected some bounty money, the newspaper said. Of the 20 Americans killed in combat in 2019, the Times said, it was not clear which deaths were under suspicion.

**'Russian-led hackers' targets US firms with ransomware**

Russia-based hackers are stepping up ransomware attacks against major US firms seeking to cripple computer networks if their demands for millions of dollars are not met, security researchers are warning. The cybersecurity firm Symantec on Thursday said it had identified at least 31 targets in the United States, including eight Fortune 500 companies. "The attackers behind this threat appear to be skilled and experienced, capable of penetrating some of the most well protected corporations," said the threat intelligence team of Broadcom-owned Symantec in its alert.

SOURCE: REUTERS, AFP

**BOYCOTTING CHINA PRODUCTS, TRADE**

**Easier said than done for India**

THE STRAITS TIMES/ANN

A recent Indian television show calling for economic disengagement with China was sponsored by Chinese mobile phone firms - an irony that perhaps best captures the piquant situation India finds itself in today.

Emotional calls to shun Chinese products, following the deadly clash on the disputed border between the two Asian giants on June 15, makes for good television viewing but snapping entrenched and extensive economic links with China is impractical.

In 2018-19, nearly 14 per cent of India's total imports came from China, covering a range of finished goods popular with price-sensitive Indian consumers as well as capital goods necessary for manufacturers here to maintain current production levels and competitiveness.

During this period, India's imports from China were valued at US\$70.3 billion (S\$97.8 billion), saddling it with a trade deficit of US\$53.6 billion.

"Restricting these imports without giving Indian manufacturers alternatives would involve the risk of shooting oneself in the foot," said Mr Pratyush Rao, the lead analyst for India at Control Risks, a global risk consultancy. "You are looking at potentially higher input costs for

your domestic manufacturing sector and higher prices for consumers," he told The Straits Times.

With manufacturing in India still stymied by problems such as poor infrastructure, red tape and restrictive labour laws, the calls for boycott are worrying many of those dependent on Chinese supply chains.

They include manufacturers in the textile hub in Tiruppur in the southern state of Tamil Nadu that employs a workforce of around 600,000 and generates annual merchandise worth US\$4 billion each for export as well as the domestic market. None of this would be possible without Chinese equipment such as sewing machines or accessories such as zip fasteners, buttons and leather badges.

Raja M Shanmugham, the president of the Tiruppur Exporter's Association, told The Straits Times, that as much as 90 per cent of the accessories used are sourced from China because global brands rely on Chinese firms to maintain uniformity across their products. "It (the call for a boycott) is a sentimental outburst without assessing the on-ground reality," he said.

Forsaking Chinese products is even more difficult now given how precariously Indian firms are placed amid the current economic downturn.

On Wednesday (June 24), the International Monetary Fund predicted a "historic low" for the

Indian economy, which is expected to contract by 4.5 per cent in 2020.

"It doesn't make business sense for companies, at a time when they are suffering acutely under economic distress, to have to completely rejig their supply chains because of geopolitical factors," said Rao.

One thing is clear though - the clash has hastened the process of weaning India from Chinese dependence. It is a process that, over the years, has been motivated by a range of factors, including a desire for self-reliance, evening out supply chain risks as well as security concerns. India, in fact, reduced its imports from China by around US\$6 billion between the 2017-18 and 2018-19 financial years, with anti-dumping duties and tariffs contributing partly to this reduction.

Trade and investment with China is likely to fall further with more restrictions that will be prompted by the current climate of distrust. Besides reports of multibillion-dollar contracts with Chinese firms being either cancelled or frozen, recent restrictions aimed at China include prior government approval for foreign direct investment and the requirement to mention the origin of products being sold at a government online trading platform.

**'The George Floyds of India'**

*Father-son death in custody sparks outrage*

REUTERS, Chennai

Outrage at the death of a father-son duo in the custody of Indian police earlier this week mounted yesterday, with thousands on social media comparing the incident to the death of George Floyd in the United States.

Jayaraj, 59, and Bennicks Immanuel, 31, were subjected to a brutal thrashing, which resulted in rectal bleeding and eventual death, according to a letter to government officials written by Jayaraj's wife J Selvarani. The letter, based on eyewitness testimony and reviewed by Reuters, seeks action against the police officers involved.

Police in Sathankulam, a town located 50km (31 miles) south of the port city of Thoothukudi in southern



Tamil Nadu state, said in a first information report (FIR) reviewed by Reuters that Jayaraj and Bennicks were picked up on Friday, June 19 for breaching coronavirus lockdown rules.

Bennicks died on Monday after complaining of breathlessness and Jayaraj died Tuesday. Two cops involved in the incident had been suspended.

Hundreds of thousands of tweets were sent out using the hashtag #JusticeforJayarajandBennicks, that was

among the top Twitter topics trending in India on Friday and among the top 30 trending globally, with celebrities and politicians condemning police action.

"The George Floyds of India are far too many," tweeted Jignesh Mevani, a lawmaker in India's western Gujarat state. "Will Indians march on streets in thousands, like America?" Mevani asked, referring to events following the death in police custody on May 25 of George Floyd, a Black man.

Nearly 15 cases of custodial violence and torture were reported in India every day on average, with 9 people dying, according to the latest annual report by India's National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) for the year 2017/18.



A ball of fire is seen following an Israel airstrike at Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip early yesterday. Two rockets were fired from the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip towards Israeli territory on June 26, the army said. It was the first reported rocket fire from the Gaza Strip since early May.

PHOTO: AFP

**Bomb kills 2 rights workers in Kabul**

AFP, Kabul

Two employees of Afghanistan's human rights body were killed in a bomb attack in Kabul yesterday, the agency said.

The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission said the pair died when a homemade "sticky bomb" attached to their vehicle exploded in the morning.

KThe attack has not been claimed by any group. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan condemned the killings.

It comes less than a week after two prosecutors and three other employees from the attorney general's office were shot dead by gunmen on the outskirts of Kabul.

On May 30, a television journalist was killed when a minibus carrying employees of private television channel Khurshid TV was hit by a roadside bomb in the city. That attack was claimed by the Islamic State group.

**Nepal steps up border road work amid row with India**

AGENCIES

The Nepal government has expedited the process of construction of the Darchula-Tinkar Road, also known as Mahakali corridor, near the India-Nepal border adjoining Pithoragarh amid a territorial dispute with its giant neighbour, India.

Since the unprecedented face-off in Ladakh's Galwan valley on June 15, in which 20 Indian soldiers and an unknown number of People's Liberation Army (PLA) troops were killed, Beijing has been using its diplomatic heft through its regional allies to put pressure on New Delhi, claim Indian analysts. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime has invested heavily in the countries neighboring India, resulting in unprecedented dependence of South Asia on China.

Indian observers allege that since the incident, Pakistan has stepped up ceasefire violations along the Line of Control and militant activities in Kashmir.

Bhutan, which has a good relation with both India and China, has stopped irrigation water to some farmers in Assam, affecting thousands of farmers in the region. The aim of this Nepali road construction,

sources said, is to "minimise the dependence of Nepalese citizens on Indian roads".

The road will also provide direct access to the China border, which lies beyond Tinkar. This will also enable Nepalese tour operators to take pilgrims to Kailash Mansarovar through this route.

The escalation of work on the road — which had been sanctioned as far back as 2008 but was being constructed at an extremely slow pace — comes in the backdrop of souring of relations between India and Nepal.

The relation turned sour after Nepal's national assembly passed the controversial bill on its updated political administrative map which includes parts of controversial territory, which India also claims, escalating the border dispute. The New Map Amendment Bill (Coat of Arms) refers to an updated map which shows strategically important territories of Kalapani, Lipulekh and Limpiyadhura as territories of Nepal.

The Nepalese move came after India built a road to on the disputed territory.

The government in New Delhi called the parliament move a violation and an artificial enlargement of claims.



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