

Pre-orders of Covid-19 vaccine top five billion

AFP, Washington

Although none of the coronavirus vaccines under development has proved its efficacy yet in clinical trials, at least 5.7 billion doses have been pre-ordered around the world. Five vaccines -- three Western and two Chinese -- are in Phase 3 efficacy trials involving thousands of people.

As research laboratories around the world race to develop a vaccine, manufacturers have received financing to help them prepare to have millions of doses ready to administer in 2021 or even before the end of the year.

US: 700 MILLION DOSES: President Donald Trump has launched "Operation Warp Speed" in a bid to develop, manufacture and distribute a Covid-19 vaccine to all Americans by January 2021. So far, Washington has handed out at a total of least 9.4 billion dollars to seven vaccine developers and signed manufacturing contracts with five of them to provide 700 million doses. The companies involved are: Johnson & Johnson, Moderna, Oxford/AztraZeneca, Novavax, Pfizer/BioNTech, Sanofi/GSK, Merck Sharp and Dohme.

EUROPE: 700 MILLION DOSES: Two vaccine developers -- Oxford/AztraZeneca and Sanofi/GSK -- have signed or are in advanced negotiations with the European Commission to provide a combined 700

million vaccine doses.

BRITAIN, JAPAN, BRAZIL: Britain, because of Brexit, is negotiating a separate pre-order of 250 million doses from four developers. Japan is counting on 490 million doses from three suppliers including 250 million from Novavax of the United States. Brazil chose a similar model, ordering 100 million doses from AstraZeneca, and partnering with China's Sinovac to produce 120 millions of "CoronaVac," which is already undergoing testing with Brazilians.

CHINA, RUSSIA: China to procure its need from local sources: Sinovac and Sinopharm. Russia said 20 nations have pre-ordered one billion doses of Sputnik V.

DEVELOPING COUNTRIES: The Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), launched in 2017 by Norway, India, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Wellcome Trust, seeks to ensure that there is "equitable access" to future vaccines. It has pre-ordered 300 million doses from AstraZeneca for dozens of developing countries in a partnership with The Vaccine Alliance (Gavi). Billions of doses would be produced for Asia and elsewhere by the giant Serum Institute of India (SII), the largest vaccine producer in the world. Novavax and AstraZeneca have separately signed agreements with SII to produce a billion doses each for India and low- and middle-income countries.



Media mogul Jimmy Lai Chee-ying, founder of Apple Daily, is seen as he was released on bail, after he was arrested by the national security unit in Hong Kong, China, yesterday. The 71-year-old was cheered by staff and handed a bouquet yesterday as he returned to the newsroom following a late night release on bail after 40 hours in custody. In images broadcast live on Facebook by his own reporters, he told staff to continue the fight for democracy through journalism defying the odds.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Pranab remains on life support

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

The condition of India's former President Pranab Mukherjee continued to be critical today and he remains on ventilator support after undergoing a brain surgery two days ago, the Army's Research and Referral hospital in New Delhi said.

The 84-year-old Congress leader was admitted to the hospital in Delhi cantonment area on August 10 and was operated for removal of a clot in the brain.

"Shri. Pranab Mukherjee's health condition continues to remain critical. Presently, he is haemodynamically stable and on a ventilator," a statement from the hospital said.

Mukherjee's condition had worsened last night and he had not shown signs of improvement, the doctors attending on him said. The 84-year-old had also tested positive for Covid-19 prior to the surgery on Monday.

As the former President battles for life, the people of Kirnahr area in West Bengal's Birbhum district, Mukherjee's ancestral village, a 72-hour 'Maha Mritunjaya yajna' continued for the second day for his speedy recovery.

Meanwhile, Pranab Mukherjee's daughter Sharmistha Mukherjee, a Congress leader based in New Delhi, tweeted today that "May God do whatever is best for him and give me strength to accept both joys and sorrows of life with equanimity."

Doubts as Russia claims vaccine

New Zealand polls uncertain as nations renew virus battle amid surging cases

AFP, London

Russia's claim that it has developed the world's first vaccine met with scepticism about its effectiveness, as New Zealand warned the re-emergence of COVID-19 could delay its upcoming election.

On Tuesday, Russia had claimed it had developed the world's first vaccine offering "sustainable immunity" against the coronavirus, despite mounting scepticism about its effectiveness.

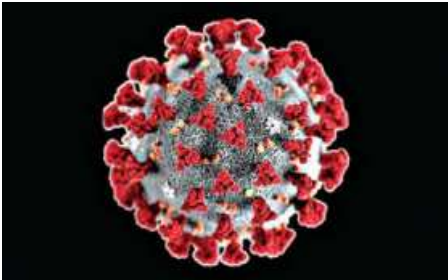
President Vladimir Putin insisted the vaccine was safe and that one of his own daughters had received the inoculation, dubbed "Sputnik" after the pioneering 1950s Soviet satellite.

On a visit to Taiwan, US Health Secretary Alex Azar echoed such concerns.

"It's important that we provide safe, effective vaccines and that the data be transparent... This is not a race to be first," Azar told reporters during a conference call.

"I should note that two of the six US vaccines that we've invested in entered the phase three clinical trials weeks ago that the Russian vaccine is now only beginning," he added.

The WHO's spokesman in Geneva Tarik



Jasarevic said it was in "close contact" with Russian health authorities but that it was too soon for the global health body to give its stamp of approval without a rigorous review.

The WHO says that 165 candidate vaccines are being worked on around the world, with six reaching Phase 3 clinical trials, the last step before regulatory approval.

On the other side of the world, New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said the upcoming election in September could be postponed as the coronavirus seems to have re-entered the Pacific country.

With 1.5 million people under stay-at-

home orders, and millions more at risk of a wider outbreak, Ardern said she was seeking advice on delaying the election currently scheduled for September 19. Parliament was due to be dissolved yesterday to allow the election to take place, but the centre-left leader held off the move until Monday to monitor how the crisis evolves.

With the number of coronavirus cases worldwide surpassing 20 million and the number of deaths fast approaching 750,000, the World Health Organization has warned that a second wave is "almost inevitable".

Countries across the globe are starting to reintroduce restrictions as the number of infections tick higher.

In Belgium, which is battling one of the most serious coronavirus outbreaks in Europe, authorities made the wearing of face masks in public compulsory in the Brussels region from Wednesday.

In Italy, too, regions have begun to order new quarantines for people returning from higher-risk European countries such as Spain as they hope to stem new outbreaks.



Smoke and flames rise after war planes belonging to the Israeli army carried out airstrikes over the southern Gaza Strip city of Rafah yesterday. The army said the strikes were "retaliation" for the launching of multiple balloons from the Hamas-run enclave in recent days. No casualties were reported. Jets, attack helicopters and tanks struck a number of Hamas targets including "underground infrastructure and observation posts," a statement said.

PHOTO: AFP

Daughters have equal rights to property

Rules Indian Supreme Court

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Daughters cannot be deprived of their right of equality and they will have equal coparcenary (joint heirship) rights in joint Hindu family property even if the father died before the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005, India's Supreme Court has ruled.

"A daughter always remains a loving daughter. Once a daughter is always a daughter. A son is a son until he gets a wife. A daughter is a daughter throughout her life," the top court observed in an important ruling on Tuesday, upholding the rights of a daughter even if the father died before the enactment of the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005.

A three-judge bench of Justices Arun Mishra, S Nazeer and MR Shah said in the ruling that the provisions contained in substituted Section 6 of the Hindu Succession Act, 1956, confer the status of coparcener on the daughter born before or after amendment in the same manner as a son with the same rights and liabilities. "Coparcener" is a term used for a person who assumes a legal right in parental property by birth only.

The rights can be claimed by the daughter born earlier with effect from September 9, 2005 with savings as provided in Section 6(1) as to the disposition or alienation, partition or testamentary disposition which had taken place before December 20, 2004. Since the right in coparcenary is by birth, it is not necessary that father coparcener should be living as on September 9, 2005.

The verdict makes it clear the amendment to the Hindu Succession Act, 1956 granting equal rights to daughters to inherit ancestral property would have retrospective effect.

The apex court said the appeals on the issue were pending before different subordinate courts and the matters have already been delayed due to legal imbroglio caused by conflicting decisions.

Back from the dead?

Stem cells give hope for revival of Malaysia's extinct rhinos

REUTERS, Kuantan

Some skin, eggs and tissue samples are all that remain of Malaysia's last rhino, Iman, who died last November after years of failed breeding attempts.

Now scientists are pinning their hopes on experimental stem cell technology to bring back the Malaysian variant of the Sumatran rhinoceros, making use of cells from Iman and two other dead rhinos.

"I'm very confident," molecular biologist Muhammad Lokman Md Isa told Reuters in his laboratory at the International Islamic University of Malaysia. "If everything is functioning, works well and everybody supports us, it's not impossible."

The smallest among the world's rhinos, the Sumatran species was declared extinct in the wild in Malaysia in 2015. Once it had roamed across Asia, but hunting and forest clearance

reduced its numbers to just 80 in neighbouring Indonesia.

Iman, 25, died in a nature reserve on Borneo island within six months of the death of Malaysia's last male rhino, Tam.

The scientists plan to use cells from the dead rhinos to produce sperm and eggs that will yield test-tube babies to be implanted into a living animal.

The plan is similar to one for the African northern white rhinoceros, which number just two. Researchers in that effort reported some success in 2018 in producing embryonic stem cells for the southern white rhino.

But the process is still far from producing a whole new animal, say Thomas Hildebrandt and Cesare Galli, the scientists leading the research. And even if it worked, the animals' lack of genetic diversity could pose a threat to long-term survival, Galli told Reuters.

Amazon fires a 'lie'

Says Brazil's President Bolsonaro

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro has said it is a "lie" that fires are ravaging the Amazon rainforest, despite data from his own government showing the number of blazes is rising.

The far-right leader has faced international condemnation for presiding over huge fires and rising deforestation in the Amazon -- criticism he took issue with in a speech to a video conference of countries that share the world's biggest rainforest.

"Tropical rainforest doesn't catch fire. So this story that the Amazon is burning is a lie, and we have to fight it with real numbers," he said Tuesday.

Yet satellite data from Brazil's national space agency, INPE, show the number of forest fires in the Brazilian Amazon last month rose 28 percent from July 2019, to 6,803.

Experts say the fires are typically not sparked naturally, but set by humans to clear land illegally for farming and ranching.

Last year, huge fires devastated the Amazon from May to October, sending a thick haze of black smoke all the way to Sao Paulo, thousands of kilometers away. The fires triggered worldwide alarm over a forest seen as vital to curbing climate change. Experts warn this year's dry season, which is just getting started, could see even more fires.

The scrutiny is pressuring Bolsonaro, who has called for protected Amazon lands to be opened up to mining and agriculture.

World's biggest container ships take shape in S Korea

AFP, Geje

On the bridge of one of the world's biggest container ships, a worker in a grey protective suit installs the compass that will guide the leviathan across the world.

The finishing touches are being put to the HMM St Petersburg at the Samsung Heavy Industries shipyard on the island of Geje, at the southern tip of South Korea.

Deep in the bowels of the enormous vessel, welders are dwarfed by the giant engines that will propel it at a maximum speed of over 22 knots.

At 400 metres (1,300 feet), the HMM St Petersburg is 100 metres longer than the Eiffel Tower, and 62 metres wide.

It has a capacity of 23,820 TEU (twenty-foot equivalent units, the standard measure of a shipping container), which owner Hyundai Merchant Marine (HMM) describes as enough to carry seven billion choco-pies, a popular Korean snack -- one for every human being on the planet.

It is the 12th and last of a new class of



24,000-TEU vessels HMM is putting into service, the largest of their kind in the world and costing \$143-151 million each.

The first of the class to begin operations, the 23,964-TEU HMM Algeiras, made its maiden voyage in April when it set a new world record for shipment volume.

HMM St Petersburg will be delivered in September and make its maiden voyage to Shanghai and other Chinese ports, before heading through the Suez Canal to Rotterdam, Hamburg, Antwerp, and London.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS