

# Vaccines effective against new Covid strain: experts

AFP, Berlin

European Union experts believe existing vaccines are effective against the new fast-spreading strain identified in Britain, Germany's health minister said yesterday. "According to everything we know so far" the new strain "has no impact on the vaccines", which remain "just as effective", Jens Spahn told public broadcaster ZDF, citing "talks among experts of European authorities".

Spahn was referring especially to the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, which is already being administered in countries including the US and UK and which is on the brink of receiving approval from the European Medicines Agency.

A health ministry spokesman said the EU experts' meeting had taken place on Sunday and included representatives of Berlin's Robert Koch Institute (RKI) for public health.

A number of EU nations have banned air travel from Britain in response to the new strain, while France said it would block people arriving from the UK and all freight unless it is unaccompanied.

Within Britain, London has announced tougher infection control measures affecting some parts of the country.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said Saturday the variant could be up to 70 percent more infectious than the main strain, based on preliminary data.

The World Health Organization said

that nine cases have been detected in Denmark and one each in the Netherlands and Australia, while Italy said late Sunday it too had detected a single case in a person returning from Britain.

Germany, which holds the EU's rotating presidency, has organised a meeting of experts to discuss the bloc's response to the new threat, the health ministry spokesman said.

The meeting will be held under the European Council's IPCR crisis response scheme, which can be invoked for health, environmental or terrorist emergencies among others.

Meanwhile, The EU's drug regulator will decide on Monday whether to authorise the Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine, with desperate countries hoping for the green light to finally start inoculating their citizens.

The Amsterdam-based European Medicines Agency dramatically moved the decision on the jab ahead from December 29, following pressure to accelerate the process from Germany and other EU states.

The clamour for action grew as Britain and the United States have already started giving their citizens the vaccine developed by US giant Pfizer and German firm BioNTech under emergency national rules.

The EU will start Covid-19 inoculations on December 27 providing the EMA grants a one-year conditional marketing authorisation, the European Commission has said.



A mask-less Santa Claus waves from a float next to unmasked children during a parade in protest against coronavirus disease restrictions, as Toronto Police said the gathering had not been authorized by the city, in Toronto, Ontario, Canada on Sunday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

# Nepal PM's move challenged in SC

Seven ministers step down after parliament dissolution

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Opponents of Nepal's prime minister turned to the Supreme Court yesterday to challenge his dissolution of parliament and the calling of an election, denouncing it as a "constitutional coup".

Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli's dissolution of parliament on Sunday raises the prospect of months of political turmoil in the Himalayan country as it battles the novel coronavirus.

Seven government ministers stepped down after Oli's dissolution saying it was violation of the "popular mandate" given to them in a 2017 general election. Protesters burned effigies of him in the streets.

Supreme Court Spokesman Bhadrakali Pokharel said three petitions against the dissolution were "in the process of being registered".

"Under the constitution, the prime minister has no prerogative to dissolve parliament," lawyer Dinesh Tripathi, who is one of the petitioners, told Reuters.

"It's a constitutional coup. I'm seeking a stay order from the court."

The president on Sunday set April 30 and May



10 as dates for the general election - more than a year ahead of schedule - on the advice of Oli's cabinet.

Oli yesterday said his decision to dissolve parliament was the only way to resolve disputes and non-cooperation in his party that have led to a "state of inaction".

The prime minister has recently lost support within his own Nepal Communist Party (NCP),

with some members accusing him of sidelining the party in government decisions and shunning members when making key appointments.

They have called on him to step down. His supporters say that in a democracy, a new election is the best way out of a crisis like this.

The strife comes as Nepal, one of the world's poorest countries, battles the coronavirus.

Nepal has had 253,772 infections and 1,788 deaths and the pandemic has battered its tourism-and-remittance-dependent economy.

Tripathi said that under the constitution, the prime minister should allow the formation of an alternate government to ensure stability in a country that has seen 26 prime ministers in 30 years.

If the court registers the petitions it could take about two weeks for a decision, legal experts say.

Neighbours China and India, which jostle for influence in Nepal, have not publicly commented on the upheaval.

"I fear there will be more political instability," said Bhimarjun Acharya, a constitutional lawyer. The political upheaval adds to the problems posed for Nepal's tourism-and-remittance-dependent economy by the Covid-19 pandemic.

# Hack response of US will go beyond 'just sanctions'

Says Biden's chief of staff; Russia denies role

REUTERS, WASHINGTON

The incoming White House chief of staff said on Sunday that President-elect Joe Biden's response to the massive hacking campaign uncovered last week would go beyond sanctions.

Ron Klain said Biden was mapping out ways to push back against the suspected Russian hackers who have penetrated half a dozen US government agencies and left thousands of American companies exposed.

"It's not just sanctions. It's steps and things we could do to degrade the capacity of foreign actors to engage in this sort of attack," Klain said on CBS' "Face the Nation."

Options being mulled by the Biden administration to punish Moscow over its alleged role include financial penalties and retaliatory hacks on Russian infrastructure, people familiar with the matter have told Reuters.



The Kremlin denies any role in the hacking. Speaking at an event to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Russia's SVR foreign intelligence agency, Russian President Vladimir Putin praised its work, saying he was impressed by the "difficult professional operations that have been conducted."

Biden, who becomes president on January 20, would likely have bipartisan support for a muscular reaction to the espionage campaign, lawmakers indicated on Sunday.

Republican Senator Mitt Romney said the data breach was "extraordinarily damaging" on NBC's "Meet the Press."

"This demands a response," he said. "This is something we have to address as soon as possible."

US Senator Mark Warner, the top Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, said on ABC that the hack could still be going on.



Farmers warm themselves on a cold winter morning at the site of a protest against new farm laws, at Singhu border, near New Delhi, India yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

# Indian farmers vow to carry on protests despite cold

REUTERS, New delhi

Tens of thousands of Indian farmers, protesting over agricultural laws that they say threaten their livelihoods, have vowed to carry on their around-the-clock sit-ins despite cold weather that has already led to some deaths among them.

Farmers from the northern states of Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh and the desert state of Rajasthan have camped on key national highways for weeks demanding a repeal of the laws, withstanding temperatures dropping to 2-3 degree Celsius (35.6-37.4 Fahrenheit).

The farmers, including a large number of older people, said they would endure the bitter winter sweeping northern India, including the capital New Delhi, to force Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration to rescind the laws introduced in September.

"It's very difficult to camp out in this weather, but we aren't scared," said Balbir Singh, an octogenarian from the Patiala district of Punjab. "We won't go back until our demands are met. Even if we have to die here, we will."

Since late November, when thousands of farmers arrived in trucks and tractors to camp out on the borders of New Delhi, nearly 30 people have died, several of them as a result of freezing weather, farmers said.

About ten people have been killed in road accidents near the protest sites, they said.

"We don't want more people to die in this protest, and I hope Modi and his government take back the laws soon," Paagh Singh, 76, said, wrapped in a blue blanket. "It's a democracy, and he (Modi) has to listen to us."

As temperatures dropped, one of the main protest sites turned into a sea of small tents and tarpaulin-covered tractor trolleys. But some demonstrators have to spend the night sleeping in the open air.

# Rare celestial dance

## Jupiter, Saturn set to come within planetary kissing range in sky

AFP, Paris

The solar system's two biggest planets, Jupiter and Saturn, were set to come within planetary kissing range in yesterday's evening sky, an intimacy that will not occur again until 2080.

This "great conjunction", as it is known to astronomers, occurs fortuitously on the winter solstice for those in the Northern Hemisphere, and the beginning of summer in the global south.

The two planets will, in fact, be more than 730 million kilometres (400 million miles) apart.

But because of their alignment in relation to Earth, they will appear to be closer to each other than at any time in almost 400 years.

Optimal "conjunction" is set to take place at 1822 GMT.

Looking with a telescope or even a good pair of binoculars, the two gas giants will be separated by no more than a fifth of the diameter of a full moon.

With the naked eye, they will merge into a "highly luminous" double planet, said Florent Deleflie from the Paris Observatory.

The last time Jupiter and Saturn nuzzled up this close was in 1623, but weather conditions in regions where the reunion could be seen blocked the view.

Visibility was apparently better the time before that during the Middle Ages, on March 4, 1226 to be precise.

# Rockets hit near US embassy in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

A volley of rockets exploded near the US embassy in Baghdad Sunday, as tensions mount ahead of the anniversary of the US killing top Iranian general Qasem Soleimani on Iraqi soil.

AFP reporters in the capital's east heard at least five booms on Sunday night, followed by whistling sounds.

A few moments later, they heard thunderous rapid-fire sounds and saw streams of red flares in the dark sky, indicating the US embassy's C-RAM rocket defence system had been activated.

Iraq's security forces issued a statement saying the attacks caused material damage, but no casualties.

A security source told AFP at least three rockets landed near the US embassy in the high-security Green Zone, while two others hit separate residential neighbourhoods.

An Iraqi man living across the street from the US diplomatic

mission in a high-security residential compound told AFP that his building was hit.

"Everyone is screaming and crying. My wife is losing it from all the terrifying sounds," he said, preferring to speak anonymously.



A member of parliament told AFP that his home had been hit by a rocket fragment, likely caused by the C-RAM's deflection or explosion of incoming rockets.

The US embassy and other foreign military and diplomatic sites have been targeted by dozens of rockets and roadside bomb attacks since the

autumn of 2019.

Western and Iraqi officials have blamed headline groups, including the pro-Iran faction Kataeb Hezbollah.

In October, these groups agreed to an indefinite truce, but Sunday's attack is the third apparent violation.

The first, on November 17, saw a volley of rockets slam into the US embassy and various parts of the Iraqi capital, killing one young woman.

On December 10, two convoys transporting logistical equipment for the US-led coalition helping Iraqi troops fight jihadists were targeted with roadside bombs.

The attacks have been claimed by groups that both US and Iraqi officials have described as smokescreens for well-known Iran-aligned armed factions in Iraq.

But in an unusual move, several factions condemned Sunday's attack.

Moqtada Sadr, a populist cleric and former militia leader, tweeted that "no one has the right to use weapons outside of the state."

## NEWS IN BRIEF

### Japan sets record military budget

Japan's cabinet yesterday approved a record budget proposal for the next fiscal year from April, including stimulus for the pandemic-hit economy and another hike in defence spending to counter China. The budget proposal totals 106.6 trillion yen (\$1.03 trillion), a 3.8 percent rise from the current year and the ninth straight annual increase. Once again the government is seeking a record defence budget, for the seventh year running, this time of 5.3 trillion yen, up 0.5 percent from fiscal 2020 as Japan faces threats from an assertive China and unpredictable North Korea. Among the key items of military spending are 57.6 billion yen to develop a next-generation fighter and 33.5 billion yen for the development of a new missile.

### FB removes anti-vaccine 'fake news' in Israel



Facebook has taken down content that spread lies in Israel against coronavirus vaccinations as the government seeks to drum up support for the programme, the Justice Ministry said on Sunday. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Saturday became the first person to be vaccinated in Israel. Opinion polls show some two-thirds of the public want to follow suit. The Justice Ministry said that, at its request, Facebook took down four groups at the weekend that had disseminated texts, photographs and videos with "deliberately mendacious content designed to mislead about coronavirus vaccines".

### Trudeau to be vaccinated publicly 'when turn comes'

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau will receive the Covid-19 shot in public once those in his age group are in line to be vaccinated, he said in an interview broadcast Sunday. Canada began vaccinating people in high-risk categories -- including frontline health care workers and residents and staff of long-term care facilities -- on December 14, with a relatively limited supply of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine. "Absolutely," Trudeau told the CBC public network in a year-end interview. "When my turn comes, I will do it publicly and enthusiastically." Trudeau added that he would follow the recommendations of public health experts. Trudeau's wife Sophie Gregoire Trudeau tested positive for the coronavirus in March, and he spent two weeks in self-imposed quarantine.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS