

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF EPIDEMIC PREPAREDNESS

This pandemic won't be the last

Warns WHO chief, says attempts to improve human health 'doomed' without tackling climate change, animal welfare

AFP, Geneva

The coronavirus crisis will not be the last pandemic, and attempts to improve human health are "doomed" without tackling climate change and animal welfare, the World Health Organization's chief said.

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus also condemned the "dangerously short-sighted" cycle of throwing cash at outbreaks but doing nothing to prepare for the next one, in a video message marking Sunday's first International Day of Epidemic Preparedness.

The WHO director-general said it was time to learn the lessons from the Covid-19 pandemic.

"For too long, the world has operated on a cycle of panic and neglect," he said.

"We throw money at an outbreak, and when it's over, we forget about it and do nothing to prevent the next one. This is dangerously short-sighted, and frankly difficult to understand."

The Global Preparedness Monitoring Board's September 2019 first annual report on world readiness for health emergencies -- published a few months before the novel coronavirus broke out -- said the planet was woefully unprepared for potentially devastating pandemics.

"History tells us that this will not be the last pandemic, and epidemics are a fact of life," said Tedros.

"The pandemic has highlighted the intimate links between the health of humans, animals and planet," he added.

"Any efforts to improve human health are doomed unless they address the critical interface between humans and animals, and the existential threat of climate change that's making our earth less habitable," he said.

"In the past 12 months, our world has been turned upside-down. The impacts of the pandemic go far beyond the disease itself, with far-reaching consequences for societies and economies," said Tedros.

But the Ethiopian former health minister said the coronavirus crisis should not have come as a surprise, given the repeated warnings.

"We must all learn the lessons the pandemic is teaching us," he said.

Tedros said all countries should invest in preparedness capacities to prevent, detect and mitigate emergencies of all kinds, and called for stronger primary health care provision.



Europe eyes to end covid nightmare

Vaccinations kick off across continent; global cases top 80m as new strain spreads

AFP, Paris

EU countries yesterday embarked on a vaccination campaign to defeat the "nightmare" of Covid-19, as the growing spread of a new coronavirus variant intensified fears the pandemic could wreak further devastation.

The job is a glimmer of hope for a continent yearning for a return to normal from a pandemic that has killed 1.76 million people worldwide since emerging in China late last year and caused at least 80 million confirmed cases, according to an AFP tally.

But polls have shown many Europeans are unwilling to take the vaccine, which could impede its effectiveness in beating the virus, while it will take months for large chunks of the population to be immunised.

"It is with deep pride and a deep sense of responsibility that I got the vaccine today. A small gesture but a fundamental gesture for all of us," said Claudia Alivernini, 29, an Italian nurse who was the first in her country to receive the Pfizer-BioNTech jab yesterday morning.

EU commission chief Ursula von der Leyen hailed the campaign start as a "touching moment of unity and a European success story", even if some European states started a day early on Saturday.

Countries are also showing different strategies in their vaccination targeting, with Italy focusing on health workers, France the elderly and in the Czech Republic the prime minister himself at the front of the queue.

In a sign of impatience, some EU countries began vaccinating on Saturday, a day before the official start, with a 101-year-old woman in a care home becoming the first person in Germany to be inoculated and Hungary and Slovakia also handing out their first shots.

Araceli Rosario Hidalgo Sanchez, a 96-year-old living in a care home in central Spain became the first person in the country to be vaccinated yesterday, in an event broadcast by national television. She said smilingly she felt "nothing" from the shot.

France began its campaign in care homes for the elderly in the Paris suburb of Seine-Saint-Denis, a low-income area hard hit by Covid-19, with a 78-year-old woman named Mauricette the first to receive the jab to applause from staff.

"We have a new weapon against the virus -- the



A 78-year-old French woman is applauded after receiving the first dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine in the country, at a hospital in Sevran, on the outskirts of Paris, France, yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

vaccine," tweeted President Emmanuel Macron.

China, Russia, Canada, the United States, Switzerland, Serbia, Singapore and Saudi Arabia have also begun their vaccination campaigns.

Britain, which last week finalised a deal on leaving the EU, began its vaccination campaign amid much fanfare on December 8, three weeks ahead of the bloc.

But it was also in Britain that a new strain of the virus emerged that has already reached several other European countries as well as Japan and Canada.

The new strain, which experts fear is more contagious, prompted more than 50 countries to impose travel restrictions on the UK.

Echoing concerns from officials across the continent, Health Minister Olivier Veran said France has not ruled out imposing a third nationwide lockdown if coronavirus cases continue to rise after the holiday season.

He said it would become clear in the next months if the vaccine did not just stop people falling sick but also from passing the virus on.

"This would allow us to leave this nightmare quicker," he said.

Vaccines other than the Pfizer-BioNTech jab are also in the pipeline, and the United States, where over a million people have already been vaccinated, last week began jabs with the vaccine developed by US biotech firm Moderna.

Meanwhile the University of Oxford and drug manufacturer AstraZeneca have applied to the UK authorities for permission to roll out their Covid-19 vaccine.

There is concern that wariness among Europeans over the vaccine could impede its effectiveness, with a poll published in the Journal du Dimanche saying 56 percent of French people don't plan to take the jab.

NEWS IN BRIEF

British PM sold out fish in Brexit trade deal: fishermen

British fishermen said on Saturday that Prime Minister Boris Johnson had sold out fish stocks to the European Union with a Brexit trade deal that gives EU boats significant access to the United Kingdom's rich fishing waters. Some British politicians also said the deal added up to a sell-out. The United Kingdom will leave the EU's Common Fisheries Policy on Dec. 31. The National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations said the fishing industry had been sacrificed by Johnson. For example, it said, the UK's share of Celtic Sea haddock will increase to 20% from 10%, leaving 80% in the hands of EU fleets for a further five years. The British government said the trade deal reflected the United Kingdom's new position as a sovereign independent coastal state and provided for a significant uplift in quota for UK fishers, equal to 25% of the value of the EU catch in UK waters.

Four killed in Pakistan army helicopter crash

A military helicopter has crashed in mountainous northern Pakistan, killing four soldiers including the two pilots, the army said. The chopper crashed Saturday in the Gilgit-Baltistan region "due to technical reasons" while transporting the body of a soldier to the military hospital in Skardu, it said in a statement. Pakistan has a chequered military and civilian aviation safety record, with frequent plane and helicopter crashes over the years. Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) came under heavy scrutiny this year after one of its planes came down among houses in Karachi, killing 98 people.

At least 11 climbers killed after heavy snowfall in Iran



At least 11 climbers have died after heavy snowfall in mountains north of Iran's capital Tehran, authorities said, and seven crew members of a ship were also missing after storms in the Gulf. Heavy snow and winds in several parts of Iran in the past few days have closed many roads and disrupted transport. Several climbers remain unaccounted for since Friday when two deaths were reported and the number reported as missing has increased as concerned families contact the authorities, state television said. Ten people had been killed on the mountain and one died in hospital after being rescued, sources in Iran said. Tehran lies at the foot of the Alborz mountain range which has several ski resorts.

Next round of Afghan peace talks to take place in Doha

The next round of negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government will be held in Qatar from next month, a top official said yesterday, despite President Ashraf Ghani's recent calls for them to be moved home. Peace talks began on September 12 at a luxury hotel in Doha and the next round of talks will begin on January 5 in Doha. Earlier in December, negotiators from both sides decided to take a break after months of often frustrating meetings which were bogged down by disputes on the basic framework of discussions and religious interpretations. Prior to going on the break, negotiators finally announced they were ready to proceed on preliminary lists of agenda items when talks resumed on January 5.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS



Syrian refugees salvage belongings from the wreckage of their shelters at a camp set on fire overnight in the northern Lebanese town of Bhanine yesterday, following a fight between members of the camp and a local Lebanese family. PHOTO: AFP

FARM LAW PROTESTS

Indian farmers agree to meet government

REUTERS, New Delhi

Leaders of Indian farmers' unions have agreed to meet ministers tomorrow, possibly paving the way for a seventh round of talks with the government which has so far failed to mollify growers who say three new agricultural laws threaten their livelihoods.

Worried over farmers' round-the-clock sit-ins on the outskirts of New Delhi, the government of Prime Minister Narendra had on Thursday invited protest leaders to further talks.

Farmers' unions still insist they want the laws repealed, a coalition of unions said on Saturday in a letter to the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare.

Tens of thousands of farmers have camped out on national highways demanding the government withdraw the laws that they fear will eventually dismantle regulated markets and stop the government buying rice and wheat at guaranteed prices.

Modi has dismissed the farmers' protests as motivated by his political opponents.

'If they do not help us, we will die'

Hundreds of refugees, including South Asians, freezing in Bosnia camp

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

Hundreds of migrants have been stranded in a squalid, burned-out tent camp in Bosnia and Herzegovina as heavy snow fell and winter temperatures plummeted.

The refugees and migrants who had taken shelter at the Lipa camp in northwest Bosnia wrapped themselves in blankets and sleeping bags on Saturday to protect against biting winds after a fire destroyed much of the camp earlier this week.

Located near the border with Croatia, near the town of Bihac, the camp had already been harshly criticised by international officials and aid groups as being inadequate for the needs of those living in it.

Days after the fire, Bosnian authorities have failed to find new accommodations for the refugees at Lipa, leaving nearly 1,000 people out in the cold, with no facilities or heat, eating only meagre food parcels provided by aid groups.

"Snow has fallen, sub-zero temperatures, no heating, nothing," the International Organization for Migration's chief of mission in Bosnia, Peter Van Der Auwerter, tweeted. "This is not how anyone should live. We need political bravery and action now."

A joint statement issued on Saturday by multiple aid organisations including the Danish Refugee Council, the UNHCR and the UN Migration Agency urged authorities to find an alternative solution immediately.

Bosnia has become a bottleneck for thousands of migrants hoping to reach Western Europe.

Most are stuck in Bosnia's northwest



Krajina region as other areas in the ethnically divided nation have refused to accept them.

The EU has warned Bosnia that thousands of migrants face a freezing winter without shelter, and it has urged the country's bickering politicians to set aside their differences and take action.

On Saturday, migrants crowded at the camp to receive water and food provided by Bosnia's Red Cross as police sought to maintain order.

"We are living like animals. Even animals are living better than us!" said a man from Pakistan who identified himself only by his first name, Kasim. "If they [do] not help us, we will die, so please help us."

Plans to relocate the migrants temporarily to a closed facility in central

Bihac have prompted protests by residents.

Left without a solution, migrants put down cardboard on the floor and set up improvised barriers for privacy inside the only standing tent at the Lipa camp.

Some people held their wet feet above the small fires lit outside to warm up, while others wrapped up tight in blankets for warmth. Many only had sneakers to wear in the snow.

To get to Croatia, migrants often use routes over a mountainous area along the border and have accused Croatian authorities of violent pushbacks. Human rights groups have documented violations by Croatian authorities over the years, including severe beatings and sexual assault of refugees and migrants. Women and minors have not been spared from the violence.

PANDEMIC AID AND SPENDING PACKAGE

Trump's refusal puts millions in trouble

REUTERS

Millions of Americans saw their jobless benefits expired on Saturday as President Donald Trump has so far refused to sign into law a \$2.3 trillion pandemic aid and spending package, insisting that it did not do enough to help everyday people.

Trump stunned Republicans and Democrats alike when he said this week he was unhappy with the massive bill, which provides \$892 billion in badly needed coronavirus relief, including extending emergency unemployment benefits that expire at the close of Dec. 26, and \$1.4 trillion for normal government spending.

Without Trump's signature, about 14 million people could lose those extra benefits, according to Labor Department data. A partial government shutdown will begin on Tuesday, putting millions of government workers' incomes at risk, unless Congress can agree a stop-gap government funding bill before then.

After months of wrangling, Republicans and Democrats agreed to the package last weekend, with the support of the White House.

But since then he has complained that the bill gives too much money to special interests, cultural projects and foreign aid, while the provision of \$600 stimulus checks to millions of struggling Americans was too small. He has demanded that be raised to \$2,000.

His refusal to sign prompted a sharp rebuke from Biden, who called on the outgoing Republican president to act immediately.

"This abdication of responsibility has devastating consequences. ... This bill is critical. It needs to be signed into law now," Biden said in a statement. The president-elect was scheduled to meet with his transition advisers yesterday.