

NEWS IN BRIEF

Pakistan hit by nationwide power blackout

Power was gradually being restored to major cities across Pakistan yesterday after it was hit by a massive electricity blackout, officials said.

SNP demands billions in 'Brexit compensation'

The pro-independence Scottish National Party (SNP) demanded on Sunday that Prime Minister Boris Johnson pay billions of pounds in compensation to Scotland for the mounting costs and disruption of Brexit.

Blast kills three in Kabul



An Afghan journalist-turned spokesman for the country's public protection force was killed along with two colleagues yesterday by a bomb targeting their vehicle, officials said.

Iran may expel UN nuclear inspectors: lawmaker

Iran will expel United Nations nuclear watchdog inspectors unless US sanctions are lifted by a Feb 21 deadline set by the hardline-dominated parliament, a lawmaker said on Saturday.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS



Counter-protesters spray pepper spray as they clash with people during a "Patriot March" demonstration in support of President Trump on January 9, 2021 in the Pacific Beach neighborhood of San Diego, California.

PHOTO: AFP

WARMING TIES WITH TAIWAN US lifts curbs on communications

REUTERS, Washington

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said he was lifting restrictions on contacts between US officials and their Taiwanese counterparts, a move likely to anger China and increase tensions between Beijing and Washington in the waning days of President Donald Trump's presidency.

China claims democratic and separately ruled Taiwan as its own territory, and regularly describes Taiwan as the most sensitive issue in its ties with the United States.

While the United States, like most countries, has no official relations with Taiwan, the Trump administration has ramped up backing for the island country, with arms sales and laws to help Taiwan deal with pressure from China.

In a statement, Pompeo said that for several decades the State Department had created complex internal restrictions on interactions with Taiwanese counterparts by American diplomats, service members and other officials.

"The United States government took these actions unilaterally, in an attempt to appease the Communist regime in Beijing," Pompeo said in a statement.

"Today I am announcing that I am lifting all of these self-imposed restrictions," he added.

The move appeared to be another part of an effort by Pompeo and Trump's Republican administration to lock in a tough approach to China before Democratic President-elect Joe Biden takes office on Jan 20.

Bonnie Glaser, an Asia expert at Washington's Center for Strategic and International Studies think tank, said examples of the restrictions included Taiwanese officials not being able to enter the State Department, but instead having to meet at hotels.

"The Biden administration will rightly be unhappy that a policy decision like this was made in the final days of the Trump administration," Glaser said.

An official with Biden's transition said that once Biden was in office he would continue to support "a peaceful resolution of cross-strait issues consistent with the wishes and best interests of the people of Taiwan."

Pence to attend Biden inauguration: reports

AGENCIES

Mike Pence will attend the upcoming inauguration of Joe Biden, multiple media reports said Saturday, the vice president becoming the latest longtime loyalist to abandon an increasingly isolated President Donald Trump.

Relations between Trump and Pence -- previously one of the mercurial president's staunchest defenders -- have nosedived since Wednesday, when the vice president formally announced Biden's victory in November's election.

A mob of far-right demonstrators stormed the US Capitol the same day in a failed bid to stop Congress from certifying Biden's win, in a riot blamed on Trump that left five dead.

Multiple media reports on Saturday cited senior administration officials as saying that Pence -- who was forced to take shelter from the intruders during the riot -- had decided to attend Biden's inauguration on January 20.

The president-elect earlier in the week said Pence would be welcome at his formal swearing-in, due to take place in a scaled-down format due to the coronavirus.

In his final tweet before being removed from Twitter on Friday, Trump said he would not attend the inauguration. The outgoing president has been accused of provoking Wednesday's violence, and now faces an unprecedented second impeachment, expected to begin today.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi warned that Democrats would launch the process unless Trump resigned or Pence invoked the 25th Amendment, in which the cabinet removes the president from office.

While Pence has not spoken publicly on the subject, the New York Times reported Thursday he was against invoking the mechanism, never used before in US history. However CNN yesterday reported, citing a source close to the vice president, he hasn't ruled out the idea.

Invoking the 25th Amendment would require Pence and a majority of the Cabinet to vote to remove Trump from office due to his inability to "discharge the powers and duties of his office" -- an unprecedented step.

Trump could dispute their move with a letter to Congress. Pence and the Cabinet would then have four days to dispute him and Congress would then vote -- it requires a two-thirds supermajority, usually 67 senators and 290 House members to permanently remove him.

ONE YEAR SINCE FIRST REPORTED DEATH IN CHINA

Coronavirus source still a puzzle

AFP, Wuhan

It is the world's most pressing scientific puzzle, but experts warn there may never be conclusive answers over the source of the coronavirus, after an investigative effort marked from the start by disarray, Chinese secrecy and international rancour.

January 11 marks the anniversary of China confirming its first death from Covid-19, a 61-year-old man who was a regular at the now-notorious Wuhan wet market.

Nearly two million deaths later, the pandemic is out of control across much of the world, leaving tens of millions ill, a pulverised global economy and recriminations flying between nations.

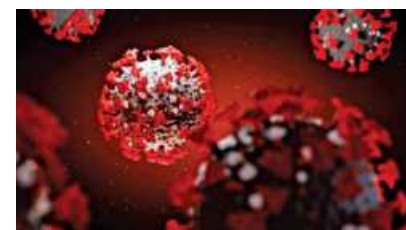
Yet China, which has broadly controlled the pandemic on its soil, is still frustrating independent attempts to trace the virus' origins and the central question of how it jumped from animals to humans.

There is little dispute that the virus which brought the world to its knees sparked its first known outbreak in late 2019 at a wet market in the central Chinese city of Wuhan where wildlife was sold as food, and the pathogen is believed to have originated in an undetermined bat species.

But the trail ends there, clouded by a mishmash of subsequent clues that

suggest its origins may predate Wuhan as well as conspiracy theories -- amplified by US President Donald Trump -- that it leaked from a Wuhan lab.

Establishing the source is vital for extinguishing future outbreaks early, leading virologists say, providing clues that can guide policy decisions on whether to cull animal populations, quarantine affected persons, or limit



wildlife hunting and other human-animal interactions.

China won early kudos for reporting the virus and releasing its gene sequence in a timely manner, compared with its cover-up of the 2002-03 SARS outbreak.

But there has also been secrecy and shifting stories on Covid-19.

Daniel Lucey, a Georgetown University epidemiologist who closely tracks global outbreaks, said the Wuhan market might not even be the issue. He notes that the virus was already spreading rapidly in Wuhan

by December 2019, indicating that it was in circulation much earlier.

That's because it may take months or even years for a virus to develop the necessary mutations to become highly contagious among humans.

Findings that the virus may have existed in Europe and Brazil before Wuhan's outbreak, added to the confusion.

And it has kept foreign experts at arm's length, with a planned mission by World Health Organization virus sleuths now in limbo after China denied them entry. On Saturday, China reversed the decision.

What the scientists will be allowed to see or may expect to find a year on is also in doubt.

Some researchers remain hopeful that the origin may still be found. But others are skeptical.

Diana Bell, a wildlife disease expert at the University of East Anglia who has studied the SARS virus, Ebola and other pathogens, said focusing on a particular origin species is misguided.

She says the overarching threat has already been exposed: a global wildlife trade that fosters a "combustible mix" of trafficked species, a known breeding ground for disease outbreaks.

"We need to stop the wildlife trade for human consumption."



Indonesian rescuers carry a body bag during the search for victims buried by landslides in Sumedang, West Java Province, Indonesia, yesterday. At least 11 people were killed and scores more were missing after torrential rains hit the region Saturday evening.

PHOTO: REUTERS

US agencies have 6 months to reveal UFO secrets

CNN ONLINE

When President Donald Trump signed the \$2.3 trillion coronavirus relief and government funding bill into law in December, so began the 180-day countdown for US intelligence agencies to tell Congress what they know about UFOs.

The director of National Intelligence and the secretary of defense have a little less than six months now to provide the congressional intelligence and armed services committees with an unclassified report about "unidentified aerial phenomena."

It's a stipulation that was tucked into the "committee comment" section of the Intelligence Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021, which was contained in the massive spending bill.

That report must contain detailed analyses of UFO data and intelligence collected by the Office of Naval Intelligence, the Unidentified Aerial Phenomena Task Force and the FBI, according to the Senate intelligence committee's directive.

The Pentagon released three short videos in April of last year showing "unidentified aerial phenomena" -- clips that the US Navy had previously confirmed were real. It's still unclear what the objects are, and there's no consensus on their origin.

VACCINE FOR DEVELOPING, POOR COUNTRIES UK helps to raise \$1 billion

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

The UK has helped to raise \$1 billion for the coronavirus COVAX Advance Market Commitment (AMC) through match-funding other donors, which will help distribute one billion doses of coronavirus vaccines to 92 developing countries, including Bangladesh, this year.

UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) made the announcement yesterday, which coincides with a three-day virtual visit to London by the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, as part of the UK's commemoration of the UN's 75th anniversary.

In September, the UK had announced at the UN General Assembly that it would match every \$4 pledged to the COVAX AMC by other donors with £1 in UK funding, up to £250 million. Since then, other countries including Canada, Japan and Germany have committed funding to the scheme, reaching the landmark target. In total the UK has now contributed £548

million to the AMC. In a statement yesterday, FCDO said this vital investment will help stop the spread of the disease and prevent future waves, helping to build back better from coronavirus globally.

"The UK is using our aid budget, scientific expertise and diplomatic leverage to strengthen global health," UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said.

He said over the last 75 years, the UK has played a leading role in supporting the UN and is working together to strengthen international collaboration to tackle today's biggest global challenges, from coronavirus to climate change.

Dominic Raab said: "It is fitting that, on the 75th anniversary of the UN, the UK has led with our allies to make one billion doses of coronavirus vaccine available to vulnerable countries.

"We'll only be safe from this virus, when we're all safe -- which is why we're focused on a global solution to a global problem."

Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh College Education Development Project (CEDP) Invitation for Tender. Includes details of the project, funding information, and tender specifications.