

Covid-19 may have spread from Wuhan lab: Pompeo

Claims Covid-like illness among its staff before mass infections, urges WHO to probe claim

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has renewed his allegation that there were Covid-like illnesses among staff at a Chinese virology institute in autumn 2019, casting further blame on Beijing as health experts arrived in the country to probe the pandemic's origins.

The top US diplomat in a statement urged the World Health Organization team that landed Thursday in Wuhan, where Covid-19 was first detected, to "press the government of China" on the "new information."

"The United States government has reason to believe that several researchers inside the (Wuhan Institute of Virology) became sick in autumn 2019, before the first identified case of the outbreak, with symptoms consistent with both Covid-19 and common seasonal illnesses," Pompeo said.

He said this contradicted reports that none of the staff at the institute had contracted Covid-19 or related viruses.

"Beijing continues today to withhold vital information that scientists need to protect the world from this deadly virus, and the next one," Pompeo said.

Covid-19 was first detected in Wuhan in late 2019 and has since billowed out



across the world killing more than two million people so far, infecting tens of millions and eviscerating the global economy.

The WHO says establishing the pathway of the virus from animals to humans is essential to preventing future outbreaks.

The outgoing administration of Donald Trump has consistently blamed China for Covid-19, which has killed 390,000 people in the United States, with the president routinely calling it the "China virus."

With five days left in his job, Pompeo has been striking out at his primary targets of China, Iran and Cuba.

Earlier in the week, Pompeo alleged that Iran has become a new "home base" for Al-Qaeda, an assertion mocked by Tehran and questioned by experts.



An aerial picture shows damaged office of West Sulawesi province's governor following an earthquake in Mamuju, West Sulawesi, Indonesia, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

'Go for it'

Says first person vaccinated in India

REUTERS, New Delhi

Hospital cleaning worker Manish Kumar became the first person in India to be vaccinated against Covid-19 yesterday, as Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched one of the world's largest immunisation campaigns to bring the pandemic under control.

Kumar received his shot at Delhi's premier All-India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), one of 3,006 vaccination centres established around the country.

"The vaccine will give me strength and motivation to serve my hospital which has been at the forefront of taking care of coronavirus patients," Kumar said. "Since I'm feeling relieved after taking the vaccine, I think everyone should go for it."

India is prioritising nurses, doctors and other frontline workers, and Modi had tears in his eyes as he addressed healthcare workers via video conferencing. The government is calling its immunisation campaign the biggest in the world and hopes around 300,600 people will be vaccinated on the first day - a first step in administering around 300 million people with two doses in the first six to eight months of the year.

With a population of nearly 1.4 billion people, India is the world's most populous country after China. Some 10.5 million people in India have been infected with the coronavirus and more than 151,000 have died, though infection rate has come down from a peak in mid-September.

India is using the Oxford University/AstraZeneca vaccine and a government-backed vaccine developed by India's Bharat Biotech whose efficacy is not yet known. People will not be able to choose which of the vaccines - both of which are being produced locally - that they get.

INDONESIA EARTHQUAKE

Hunt on for buried survivors

Death toll hits 46 as aftershocks rattle nerves; scores wounded

REUTERS, Jakarta

An aftershock jolted Indonesia's Sulawesi island yesterday as rescue workers combed the rubble of collapsed buildings for survivors after an earthquake killed at least 46 people on Friday and sent thousands of residents fleeing in panic.

The country's disaster mitigation agency said no damage or casualties were reported from yesterday's magnitude-5.0 tremor in the West Sulawesi districts of Mamuju and Majene, which shook the area a day after the magnitude-6.2 quake.

Agency head Doni Monardo told local TV the search continued for people who could still be trapped alive under rubble, and a spokesman told reporters emergency measures had been put in place in the province to help rescue efforts.

More than 820 people were injured



and about 15,000 left their homes after the quake, the agency said. Some sought refuge in the mountains, while others went to cramped evacuation centres, witnesses said.

Friday's quake and its aftershocks damaged more than 400 homes and two hotels, as well as flattening a hospital and the office of a regional governor, where authorities told Reuters several people were still trapped.

Nur Samsiah said her son, a nurse, had been killed as he worked at the collapsed hospital.

"My son was on the ground floor of the building and he couldn't run for cover," she said.

Arianto Ardi from the search and rescue agency in Mamuju told Reuters that search efforts would focus on the two hotels.

Dwikorita Karnawati, the head of the national meteorology agency, told local television yesterday another quake was possible and could reach a magnitude of 7.0, urging residents to keep out of the sea because of the tsunami risk.

Straddling the so-called Pacific Ring of Fire, Indonesia is regularly hit by earthquakes.

In 2018, a devastating 6.2-magnitude quake and subsequent tsunami struck the city of Palu, in Sulawesi, killing thousands.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Taliban kill 12 pro-govt militiamen in Afghanistan

Two Taliban fighters who had infiltrated a base of pro-government Afghan militiamen killed 12 of them, officials and the insurgent group said yesterday. The night-time attack at a post manned by the militiamen occurred in the district of Ghorian in the western Herat province late on Friday, the governor for the district Farhad Khademi told AFP. The Taliban also said two of its fighters had carried out the attack and then returned. In a separate incident, a vehicle carrying policemen was struck by a roadside bomb in the centre of the Afghan capital Kabul, police spokesman Ferdaws Faramarz told reporters. Two policemen were killed and one wounded in the attack, he said.

Japan's suicides jump 16pc in Covid-19 2nd wave: study

Suicide rates in Japan have jumped in the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly among women and children, even though they fell in the first wave when the government offered generous handouts to people, a survey found. The July-October suicide rate rose 16% from the same period a year earlier, a stark reversal of the February-June decline of 14%, according to the study by researchers at Hong Kong University and Tokyo Metropolitan Institute of Gerontology. Suicide rate during the second wave jumped 37% for women as the prolonged pandemic hurt industries where women predominate, increasing the burden on working mothers, while domestic violence increased, the report said. The study found the child suicide rate spiked 49% in the second wave, corresponding to the period after a nationwide school closure.

Laschet succeeds Merkel as CDU party leader



Centrist Armin Laschet was elected chairman of Germany's Christian Democrats (CDU) yesterday, succeeding Angela Merkel and putting him on course to run as the conservative party's candidate for chancellor in federal elections in September. Laschet, the premier of the western state of North Rhine-Westphalia - Germany's most populous - won a runoff vote against Friedrich Merz, securing 521 votes against 466 for his arch-conservative rival, according to a ballot of 1,001 party delegates. At the helm of the CDU he replaces Europe's predominant politician and a consistent winner with German voters since taking office in 2005, who has said she will not run for chancellor again.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS



A protester kneels in front of a heap of stationery and bamboo canes during a "Bad Student" demonstration outside the Ministry of Education in Bangkok yesterday, on the occasion of Teachers' Day in Thailand.

PHOTO: AFP

US hits Iran, China, Cuba with sanctions

Europe rebukes Iran over uranium plans

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Friday imposed sanctions on three of his primary targets -- China, Iran and Cuba -- in a last-minute push aimed in part at boxing in President-elect Joe Biden.

Five days before he turns in his keys at the State Department, Pompeo vowed to punish China over its clampdown in Hong Kong -- a stance backed by Biden -- but moved further away from Biden's goal of easing tensions with Iran and Cuba.

Pompeo condemned as "appalling" the massive operation on January 6 in Hong Kong in which China rounded up 55 people including an American lawyer, John Clancey.

President Donald Trump's outgoing administration slapped sanctions on six people over the detentions including Tam Yiu-Chung, Hong Kong's sole delegate to China's top lawmaking body, the National People's Congress Standing Committee.

On Friday, the Treasury Department said it was imposing sanctions on Cuba's interior minister, Lazaro Alberto Alvarez Casas, days after Pompeo said he was putting the island back on the US list of state sponsors of terrorism.

Pompeo also announced fresh actions Friday on a Chinese steel company and a UAE-based building materials firm for working with Iran Shipping Lines, which is under US sanctions.

European powers yesterday voiced deep concern over Iran's plans to produce uranium metal, warning that Tehran has "no credible civilian use" for the element.

"The production of uranium metal has potentially grave military implications," said the foreign ministers of Britain, France and Germany in a joint statement.

Nepal team tames K2 in winter

AFP, Islamabad

A team of Nepali climbers made history yesterday after becoming the first to summit Pakistan's K2 in winter, singing their country's national anthem as they reached the top.

Dozens of mountaineers have been competing over the past few weeks to summit the world's second highest mountain, the last peak above 8,000 metres (26,000 feet) to be topped in winter.

"WE DID IT," tweeted Seven Summit Treks, a trekking company leading one of the expeditions.

"The Karakorum's 'Savage Mountain' been summited in most dangerous season: winter. Nepalese climbers finally reached the summit of Mt K2 this afternoon at 17:00 local time."

The name "Savage Mountain" comes from the punishing conditions there -- winds can blow at more than 200 kilometres per hour and temperatures can drop to minus 60 degrees Celsius.

Since the maiden attempt in 1987-1988, just a handful of winter expeditions have been tried on the storied 8,611-metre (28,250-foot) peak in the Karakoram range

along the Chinese border. None had got higher than 7,650 metres until yesterday, when the good conditions allowed the climbers to push ahead.

The 10 Nepali climbers had earlier been spread across different teams, but formed a new group in order to claim the feat in Nepal's name. The news sparked joy throughout Nepal, long used to watching foreign climbers seize the records.

One of the final technical difficulties to be overcome by the group was the dreaded "bottleneck", a narrow and steep passage where 11 people were killed in August 2008 in K2's worst known tragedy. Many climbers have died trying to reach the summit, while others were killed on the dangerous descent.

Unlike Mount Everest, which has been topped by thousands of climbers young and old, K2 is a much lonelier place.

Northern Pakistan is home to some of the world's tallest mountains, including K2 in the territory of Gilgit-Baltistan. Nestled between the western end of the Himalayas, the Hindu Kush mountains and the Karakoram range, Gilgit-Baltistan has 18 of the world's 50 highest peaks.

Dates announced for Palestinian elections

AFP, Ramallah

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas on Friday announced dates for the first Palestinian elections in more than 15 years, setting legislative polls for May 22 and a July 31 presidential vote.

Abbas's Fatah party, which controls the Palestinian Authority based in the occupied West Bank, and the Hamas Islamists, who hold power in Gaza, have for years expressed interest in taking Palestinians back to the polls.

A long-standing rivalry between the two main Palestinian factions was seen as a leading factor in stalling progress towards a new vote.

But Fatah and Hamas have lately been engaged in unity talks, reaching an agreement in principle in September to hold elections in 2021.

Hamas welcomed Abbas's announcement. A statement on the official Palestinian Wafa news agency said Abbas has signed "a presidential decree concerning elections", specifying the May and July dates.

The 2005 Palestinian presidential vote saw Abbas elected with 62 percent support to replace the late Yasser Arafat.

There has been no indication from Fatah as to whether the 85-year-old Abbas intends to seek re-election. A rare poll by the Palestinian Centre for Policy and Research carried out last year said Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh would beat Abbas in a presidential election.



Honduras' soldiers check the identifications of nationals taking part in a new caravan of migrants, set to head to the United States, at a checkpoint near the El Florido border crossing point with Guatemala, in El Florido, Honduras, on Friday. At least 4,500 Honduran migrants pushed past police and crossed into Guatemala Friday night, passing the first hurdle of a journey north they hope will take them to a better life in the United States.

PHOTO: REUTERS