

NEWS IN BRIEF

UK not 'institutionally racist'

Racism persists in Britain but the country is not "institutionally racist", according to a much-anticipated study to be published yesterday by a government commission...

Capitol police sue Trump over January 6 riot

Two Capitol Police officers sued former US president Donald Trump Tuesday for inciting the January 6 insurrection that left dozens of their fellow officers injured and one dead.

Russia registers 'world's first' Covid vaccine for animals



Russia yesterday announced it had registered what it said was the world's first coronavirus vaccine for animals, describing the step as important to disrupting mutations.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS



Ethnic Karen people take part in an anti-military coup demonstration in Hlaingbwe township, in eastern Myanmar's Karen state, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

US vows to defend rights everywhere

AFP, Washington

The United States will speak out about human rights everywhere including in allies and at home, Secretary of State Antony Blinken vowed Tuesday.

Presenting the State Department's first human rights report under President Joe Biden, the new top US diplomat vowed to stand up for human rights everywhere for "America's interests".

Blinken voiced alarm over abuses around the world including in China, again speaking of "genocide" being committed against the Uyghur community.

Blinken also voiced alarm over the Myanmar military's deadly crackdown on pro-democracy protesters, attacks on civilians in Syria and a campaign in Ethiopia's Tigray.

The report, written in dry, factual language, did not spare longstanding US allies. It pointed to allegations of unlawful killings and torture in Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

However, the report continued using the term "Israel, West Bank and Gaza", not "Israel and Occupied Territories".

Criticism unethical, biased

Says China as West, WHO chief doubt Covid origin report

AGENCIES

China yesterday slammed "unethical" critics as it faced mounting pressure over origins of the Covid-19 pandemic, after the World Health Organization chief revived the theory that the coronavirus may have leaked from a Chinese lab.

WHO-backed experts had judged it "extremely unlikely" that the virus was leaked from a Chinese lab after a politically sensitive mission to the ground-zero city of Wuhan.

The United States also led a chorus of concern over the findings, with China riled by swirling accusations that it failed to give proper access and data to the investigators.

This practice of politicising the search for the origins of the virus is extremely unethical, Chinese

GLOBAL GENDER GAP REPORT

Pandemic delays gender parity by a generation

AFP, Geneva

The pandemic has rolled back years of progress towards equality between men and women, according to a report released Wednesday showing the crisis had added decades to the trajectory towards closing the gender gap.

A range of studies have shown that the Covid-19 pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on women, who have lost jobs at a higher rate than men, and had to take on much more of the extra childcare burden when schools closed.

The effects will be felt in the long-term, according to the World Economic Forum, which in its annual Global Gender Gap Report found that the goalposts for gender parity appeared to be moving further away.

The organization had found in its previous report, published in December 2019 right before the pandemic hit, that gender parity across a range of areas would be reached within 99.5 years.

"Another generation of women will have to wait for gender parity," the WEF said in a statement.

The Geneva-based organisation's annual report tracks disparities between the sexes in 156 countries across four areas: education, health, economic opportunity and political empowerment.

On the plus side, women appear to be gradually closing the gender gap in areas such as health and education.

But inequality in the workplace is still not expected to be erased for another 267.6 years.

It was in the political sphere that the march towards gender parity did the biggest about-face, the WEF study found. Women still hold just over a quarter of parliamentary seats worldwide, and only 22.6 percent of ministerial positions.

On its current trajectory, the political gender gap is not expected to close completely for another 145.5 years, the report found.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

France mulls lockdown as Europe reels from surges

Pfizer vaccine safe, 100pc effective on adolescents in trial

foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said at a press briefing, stressing that full access was granted to the Wuhan lab.

China was slammed last year by former US president Donald Trump, who had promoted the theory that the virus could have leaked from the Wuhan Institute of Virology and accused Beijing of not being transparent about the initial outbreak.

As governments bicker and point fingers over its origins, the virus has spiked again in many parts of the world, including Europe, where

French President Emmanuel Macron will address the nation to respond to criticism that he has let Covid-19 run out of control.

The known global Covid-19 death toll has exceeded 2.8 million, and the virus has gained fresh, devastating momentum in many countries.

Meanwhile, Pfizer Inc and BioNTech SE yesterday said their Covid-19 vaccine was safe and effective and produced robust antibody responses in 12- to 15-year olds, paving the way for school reopening.

In the trial of 2,260 adolescents aged 12 to 15, there were 18 cases of Covid-19 in the group that got a placebo shot and none in the group that got the vaccine, resulting in 100% efficacy in preventing Covid-19, the companies said in a statement.

Global rainforest loss 'relentless' in 2020

Primary forest loss jumped about 12pc from 2019; Brazil worst offender, SE Asia bright spot

THOMSON REUTERS FOUNDATION, Kuala Lumpur

Tropical forest losses hit their third-highest level in almost two decades last year, despite improved conservation in parts of Southeast Asia, researchers said yesterday, warning of rising deforestation risks as nations restart pandemic-hit economies.

The loss in 2020 of 4.2 million hectares (10.4 million acres) of primary forest - intact areas of old-growth trees - equalled the size of the Netherlands, according to data from Global Forest Watch (GFW) and the University of Maryland.

"2020 was supposed to be this landmark year for all of these international commitments ... and actually we're seeing things moving in the wrong direction," said Mikaela Weisse, a project manager at the GFW forest monitoring service, run by the World Resources Institute (WRI), a Washington-based think-tank.

A group of global household brands missed a 2020 target to buy only sustainably produced commodities, while a goal backed by more than 200 countries, companies and green groups to cut natural forest loss by at least half by 2020



was not met.

WRI said primary forest loss, which hit a record high in 2016 and 2017, was about 12% higher in 2020 than in 2019.

The top three countries for primary forest loss last year were Brazil, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Bolivia.

Brazil once more topped the list for annual primary forest loss with 1.7 million hectares in 2020, more than three times the next-highest country and a hike of 25% from 2019, they said.

Neighbouring Bolivia rose to number three with nearly 276,900 hectares lost, mainly due to fires. As in Brazil, most fires were likely set by

people to clear land but burned out of control due to drought and hot weather.

Meanwhile, in Colombia, ranked sixth, primary forest loss rose in 2020 to nearly 166,500 hectares after a dip in 2019.

The DRC, in second place, lost 490,000 hectares of primary forest in 2020. Like previous years, the majority was caused by the expansion of small-scale agriculture and wood energy demand.

Indonesia, which has the world's third-largest tropical forests, fell from third to fourth place with primary forest loss at just over 270,000 hectares, showing a fourth straight year of declines. Strong government policies and effective law enforcement were instrumental behind the success.

Forest loss also dropped for the fourth year in neighbouring Malaysia, ranked ninth place, to nearly 73,000 hectares.

The downward trend in Indonesia and Malaysia was not visible in other Southeast Asian countries, however, with Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar showing sustained or higher levels of deforestation.



'WE DIDN'T HAVE ANYTHING TO EAT'

One child's solo odyssey from Guatemala to the US border

AFP, Roma

Oscar is 12 years old and has just crossed the Rio Grande river from Mexico to Texas in a small, inflatable boat piloted by human traffickers. He is tearful, hungry and afraid after a dangerous month-long journey from Guatemala.

His first words upon arrival in the United States: "Vengo solo (I come alone)."

"I came here because we didn't have anything to eat," the thin boy with big brown eyes tells AFP as nightfall settles on the Rio Grande Valley.

A surge in migrants at the United States border with Mexico has emerged as one of the major challenges facing Democratic President Joe Biden just two months after taking office.

Unaccompanied children and thousands of families have been allowed in at a time when the Border Patrol's processing facilities and government detention centers are full to overflowing.

For his part, Oscar hopes to be reunited soon with his uncle -- a house painter who has lived in Los Angeles for 15 years -- after his traumatic trip.

Before leaving, "My mama told me: 'Don't cry.' But I cried," says Oscar, the only son of a single mother who lost her job as a cleaning woman because of the Covid-19 pandemic. He is unable to hold back his tears.

The worst part of the journey, Oscar says, was the 12 hours spent in a trailer packed with migrants near the border with Mexico. "It was hot and everyone started to faint," he says. Oscar did too, until someone gave him water.

In the United States, he says, "I'm going to be able to study. I'm going to learn how to bring my mama."

Tens of thousands who arrive at US borders awaits different fates. Adults who arrive alone are all deported, while some families with minors get a chance of hearing.

FIGHT AGAINST CORONAVIRUS

T cells respond to new virus variants

REUTERS, Chicago

A critical component of the immune system known as T cells that respond to fight infection from the original version of the novel coronavirus appear to also protect against three of the most concerning new virus variants, according to a US laboratory study released on Tuesday.

But antibodies - which block the coronavirus from attaching to human cells - may not tell the whole story, according to the study by researchers at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID). T cells appear to play an important additionally protective role.

"Our data, as well as the results from other groups, shows that the T cell response to Covid-19 in individuals infected with the initial viral variants appears to fully recognize the major new variants identified in the UK, South Africa and Brazil," said Andrew Redd of the NIAID and Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine who led the study.

The researchers analyzed blood from 30 people who had recovered from Covid-19 before the emergence of the new more contagious variants.

From those samples, they identified a specific form of T cell that was active against the virus, and looked to see how these T cells fared against the concerning variants from South Africa, the UK and Brazil.

They found the T-cell responses remained largely intact and could recognize virtually all mutations in the variants studied.

The findings add to a prior study that also suggested T cell protection appears to remain intact against the variants. The NIAID researchers said larger studies are needed to confirm the findings.



Armed police officers stand guard outside the gate of national police headquarters following a suspected militant attack, in Jakarta, Indonesia, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Advertisement for the Bangladesh Education Trust (BET) exam. It includes the organization's name, address, contact information, and a list of subjects for the exam: Social Science, Life Science, Physical Science, Marine Science, Information and Communications Technology, Sustainable Development Goals, Arts, Humanities, Commerce and Law, and Climate, Forest and Environmental Science.