

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

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...

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...

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. He said the Biden administration was prioritizing coordination with allies...

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

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...

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...

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...



WRI said primary forest loss, which hit a record high in 2016 and 2017, was about 12% higher in 2020 than in 2019. Agricultural expansion, wildfires, logging, mining and population growth all fuel deforestation...

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...

"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 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

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.

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.

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

Are we doing our part?

FROM PAGE 1 strains, threatening lives, livelihoods, and our vulnerable public health system again.

Yesterday, the health directorate reported the highest number of infections recorded in a single day, 5,358, with a positivity rate of 19.90 percent.

The government and health experts alike have been sounding alarm for quite a while. They have been urging people to maintain health safety guidelines, wear masks and maintain social distancing and hygiene.

To curb the spread, the government, albeit late, has come up with 18 instructions on people's movement that will remain in force for at least for two weeks.

This begs the question: Have the authorities created enough public awareness about the virus and its impact on people's lives and livelihood?

The answer is no. For example, the UK variant was detected in January and disclosed by the media in March.

The mandatory quarantine for returnees, contact tracing, rigorous testing were never in place to contain the new threat.

The government seemed to have had its priorities mixed-up. It needed to build its capacity - more ICUs, oxygen supply - and re-energise its frontlines ahead of a fresh battle.

But that was not done. The people will hold the government responsible if it fails to ensure the measures, be it healthcare services or financial assistance, required to tackle the situation.

But as citizens, we have our part to play to suppress this pandemic too. Are we doing those? Are we, the people, heeding to the advice seriously?

A few people are following the guidelines religiously, but the majority don't even think twice before flouting them. It is as if the fear has gone

and everything is back to the pre-pandemic time.

Events like mass congregations, parties or social get-togethers are being held like they used to before the pandemic. Or in other words, we have become too careless to take the matter seriously.

Even at this crucial juncture, we are unfortunately seeing a lack of social responsibility among all sections of our society, illiterate, semi-literate, educated and highly skilled professionals. Ask anyone about the refusal to follow health guidelines and you will hear: "I don't need a mask as I've already had Covid" or "It's not going to make much of a difference" or "Covid only infects rich people".

The most worrying of the excuses is: "I already got the vaccine, so I don't need a mask".

There have been other disturbing reports like people escaping from quarantine in hospitals. Even when things are normal, we tend to flout laws and social norms, be it traffic or others, without thinking about the consequences or inconvenience caused to others.

In this crucial time, we need to understand the consequences of our actions. It is not only for us, but for others as well. We have a huge number of senior citizens and middle-aged people vulnerable to Covid-19 as they have comorbidities like cardiac conditions, diabetes, and asthma.

And a single instance of irresponsible behaviour could not only cost us our loved ones, but also take a heavy toll on our fellow citizens, our neighbours, and our country.

With the government immunisation programme going slow, we must understand that it will take many months to inoculate everyone eligible for the shots.

This new crisis requires us to reset our expectations and make behavioural changes. The government is doing what it can, but in the given situation we, the citizenry, should also understand our roles and responsibilities to stop the transmission.

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.

Several recent studies have shown that certain variants of the novel coronavirus can undermine immune protection from antibodies and vaccines. 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 government's scholarship program for students. It includes details about the program, application process, and contact information.