

NEWS
IN brief

Saline water for vaccine!

Indian police yesterday said that around 2,000 people were injected with fake Covid-19 vaccines in Mumbai, and another 500 -- some of them disabled -- may have suffered the same fate in Kolkata. Police in Mumbai said that people who thought they were being vaccinated were in fact injected with a saline solution. Ten people have been arrested including two doctors at a private hospital in the financial hub. Police in Kolkata meanwhile have arrested a man posing as a civil servant who reportedly ran as many as eight spurious vaccination camps. How many fake jabs he administered is yet to be known.

Khamenei gets homemade jab

Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, 81, yesterday received the first dose of a domestically produced coronavirus vaccine, his social media announced. State television said Khamenei had received a single dose of the COVIran Barekat jab, developed by a powerful state-owned foundation known as Setad. Strangled by US sanctions that have made it difficult to make money transfers to foreign firms, Tehran says it is struggling to import vaccines for its 83 million population. In early January, Khamenei banned imports of UK- and US-produced vaccines, saying they could "contaminate" the country.

Martial arts school fire kills 18

At least 18 people were killed and 16 injured when a fire broke out at a martial arts school in central China in the early hours of yesterday, according to the local government. Local media reported that most of the victims were boarding pupils aged between seven and 16. The unnamed manager of the centre in Henan province was arrested, the statement said. The cause of the fire was still unclear.



Hazardous kiss

British Health Secretary Matt Hancock apologised yesterday for breaching social distancing guidelines after pictures appeared of him embracing and kissing his top aide, and the prime minister said he believed the matter was now closed. Photographs published on the front page of the Sun showed Hancock kissing the woman -- a friend hired for a taxpayer-funded role -- in his office. A spokesman for Boris Johnson said the prime minister had accepted Hancock's apology and had full confidence in him. The opposition Labour Party has called on Johnson to sack Hancock.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS



A grave digger buries a victim of Covid-19 at a graveyard on the outskirts of Saint Petersburg, Russia, yesterday. Russia reported 20,393 new Covid-19 cases yesterday, taking the official national tally since the pandemic began to 5,409,088. The government coronavirus task force said 601 people had died of coronavirus-linked causes in the past 24 hours, pushing the national death toll to 132,064.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Quotes of the day



For me, Hungary has no place in the EU anymore.

DUTCH PRIME MINISTER MARK RUTTE SLAMS HUNGARY OVER NEW BILL BANNING LGBTQ



I will always be proud that we did our part on that tragic day (US Capitol on Jan 6) to reconvene the Congress and fulfilled our duty.

FORMER US VICE PRESIDENT MIKE PENCE

Time is running out
US, France warn Iran on nuke deal; Afghan leaders set to meet Biden as US 'assessing' Taliban's willingness for peace

AFP, Paris

The United States and France yesterday warned Iran that time was running out to return to a nuclear deal, voicing fear that Tehran's sensitive atomic activities could advance if talks drag on.

On the first high-level visit to Paris by President Joe Biden's administration, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his French hosts saluted a new spirit of cooperation after four years of turbulence under Donald Trump.

But the two sides said that one key Biden promise -- to return to the 2015 accord on the Iranian nuclear programme that was trashed by Trump -- was at risk if the clerical regime does not make concessions during talks that have been going on for months in Vienna.

Blinken warned that the United States still had "serious differences"

with Iran, which has kept negotiating since last week's presidential election won by hardliner Ebrahim Raisi.

"There will come a point, yes, where it will be very hard to return back to the standards set by the JCPOA," Blinken told reporters, using the formal name of the accord.

"We haven't reached that point -- I can't put a date on it -- but it's something that we're conscious of."

Blinken warned that if Iran "continues to spin ever more sophisticated centrifuges" and steps up uranium enrichment, it will bring nearer the "breakout" time at which it will be dangerously close to the ability to develop a nuclear bomb.

But Blinken said that Biden still supported a return to the accord, under which Iran had drastically scaled back its nuclear work until Trump withdrew in 2018 and imposed

crippling sanctions.

France -- which like Britain, Germany, Russia and China had stayed in the 2015 accord despite pressure from Trump -- also ramped up pressure on Iran to move ahead.

Talks have stalled in part over Iran's insistence on the lifting of all sanctions, pointing to the promises of economic relief under the accord.

Meanwhile, in Washington, President Joe Biden and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and Ghani's former political opponent, Abdullah Abdullah were set to meet.

"We are looking very carefully at the security on the ground in Afghanistan and we're also looking very hard at whether the Taliban is, at all, serious about a peaceful resolution of the conflict," Blinken told a joint news conference with France's foreign minister.

EU leaders rebuff push for Putin summit

AFP, BRUSSELS

EU leaders yesterday said the bloc had rejected a push by Germany and France to relaunch meetings with Russian President Vladimir Putin after fierce resistance from member states worried about Moscow's aggressions.

Berlin and Paris blindsided EU counterparts by putting forward a last-minute proposal for the bloc to resume meetings with Putin in the wake of US President Joe Biden's sit-down with him in Geneva last week.

But there was opposition from numerous EU member states -- especially in eastern Europe -- which remain deeply wary of rewarding the Kremlin with talks before it changes course.

"It was not possible to agree today that we should meet immediately at the top level," German Chancellor Angela Merkel said after hours of wrangling between the bloc's leaders in Brussels.

The German leader said that leaders had agreed to maintain and develop a "dialogue format" with Russia.

Moscow said Thursday that Putin was a "supporter" of the summit proposal, which would have potentially revived a regular fixture that was frozen after the takeover of Crimea by Russia sent ties spiralling.

The EU is looking to revamp its strategy on keeping its vast eastern neighbour in check, as Brussels admits that relations with the Kremlin look set to deteriorate further despite having already reached their "lowest level".

Moscow has been at loggerheads with a number of Western capitals recently after a Russian troop build-up on Ukraine's borders and a series of espionage scandals that have resulted in diplomatic expulsions.



Most vulnerable may need booster shots every year

WHO fears new variants, jab shortages may prolong crisis

REUTERS, Brussels

The World Health Organization (WHO) forecasts that people most vulnerable to Covid-19, such as the elderly, will need to get an annual vaccine booster to be protected against variants, an internal document seen by Reuters shows.

The estimate is included in a report, which is to be discussed on Thursday at a board meeting of Gavi, a vaccine alliance that co-leads the WHO's Covid-19 vaccine programme COVAX. The forecast is subject to changes and is also paired with two other less likely scenarios.

Vaccine makers Moderna Inc and Pfizer Inc, with its German partner BioNTech, have been vocal in their view that the world will soon need booster shots to maintain high levels of immunity, but the evidence for this is still unclear.

The document shows that the WHO considers annual boosters for high-risk individuals as its "indicative" baseline scenario, and boosters every two years for the

general population. It does not say how these conclusions were reached, but shows that under the base scenario new variants would continue to emerge and vaccines would be regularly updated to meet these threats.

The document, which is dated June 8 and is still a "work in progress," also predicts under the base case that 12 billion Covid-19 vaccine doses will be produced globally next year. That would be slightly higher than the forecast of 11 billion doses for this year.

In its worst-case scenario, the UN agency says production would be 6 billion doses next year, due to stringent regulation for new shots and manufacturing issues with existing ones. That could be compounded by the need for annual boosters for the entire world, and not just the most vulnerable, to combat variants and limited duration of protection.

But if world takes actions to the right direction and shares vaccines equitably, there would be no need for boosters as vaccines would show strong efficacy against variants and long protection.

COVID-19 VACCINATION

- General population to need booster every two years
- In worst-case scenario annual boosters may be needed for all



A member of the emergency services rests amid the debris caused by a rare tornado that struck parts of some towns and killed five people, in the village of Moravska Nova Ves, Czech Republic yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

A king who really cares

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Wearing a baseball cap and knee-length traditional Gho robe, carrying a backpack, Bhutan's king has walked through jungles infested with leeches and snakes, trekked mountains and quarantined several times in a hotel in the capital.

For 14 months, King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, has been travelling by foot, car and horse to remote hamlets to oversee measures to protect his tiny kingdom of 700,000 from the coronavirus outbreak that has flared up in neighbouring India.

The impact of the 41-year-old king's excursions are evident in a Covid-19 death toll of just one for the nation nestled between India and China in the Eastern Himalayas.

"When the king travels for miles and knocks ... to alert people about



the pandemic, then his humble words are respected and taken very seriously," said Lotay Tshering, the country's prime minister.

"His Majesty's presence is far more powerful than just issuing public guidelines," Tshering told Reuters. His presence assures people they are not alone in their fight against the pandemic, the prime minister said.

Tshering, a practicing urologist, often accompanies the Oxford-educated king for trips near the

porous border shared with India, where a second wave of the pandemic more than doubled the death toll over the last two months.

Bhutan became a constitutional monarchy in 2008. But loyalty to the royal family still dominates the nation's socio-political landscape.

In recent weeks, the king walked for five days on a trail passing through elevations of up to 4,343 m to thank primary health workers in remote areas.

"Our king's biggest fear is that if the pandemic spreads like a forest fire then our (nation) could be wiped out," said a senior palace official.

PM Tshering has said Bhutan is looking to mix-and-match vaccine doses because after inoculating 90% of its eligible population with their first dose of the AstraZeneca shot, the nation ran out of supplies.

751 UNMARKED GRAVES AT INDIGENOUS SCHOOL
Canada shaken by discovery

AFP, Montreal

More than 750 unmarked graves have been found near a former Catholic boarding school for indigenous children in western Canada, a tribal leader said Thursday -- the second such shock discovery in less than a month.

The revelation once again cast a spotlight on a dark chapter in Canada's history, and revived calls on the Pope and the Church to apologize for the abuse suffered at the schools, where students were forcibly assimilated into the country's dominant culture.

"As of yesterday, we have hit 751 unmarked graves" at the former Marieval boarding school in Saskatchewan province, Cowessess First Nation Chief Cadmus Delorme told reporters.

"This is not a mass grave site. These are unmarked graves," he said, adding that each plot would be assessed in the coming weeks to determine the number of victims

buried at the site.

"We had concentration camps here," Bobby Cameron, head of the Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations in Saskatchewan, told broadcaster CBC. "Canada will be known as the nation who tried to exterminate the First Nations."

Excavations at the Marieval school, about 150 kilometers east of the provincial capital Regina, began at the end of May, after the discovery of the remains of 215 schoolchildren at another such former school in British Columbia.

Until the 1990s, some 150,000 Native American, Metis and Inuit children were forcibly recruited into 139 of these residential schools across Canada, where they were isolated from their families, language and culture. Many were subjected to ill-treatment and sexual abuse, and more than 4,000 died in the schools, according to a commission of inquiry that concluded Canada had committed "cultural genocide."

Ex-cop to be sentenced for Floyd murder

AFP, Minneapolis

Former policeman Derek Chauvin could be ordered behind bars for 30 years yesterday when he is sentenced for the murder of African American George Floyd.

Chauvin and three colleagues arrested Floyd, 46, in May last year on suspicion of having passed a fake \$20 bill in a store in Minneapolis.

Chauvin then pinned Floyd on the street and knelt on the back of Floyd's neck for nearly 10 minutes, indifferent to the dying man's groans and to the pleas of distraught passers-by.