

NEWS IN brief

Cyberattack hits US businesses

A US IT company urged customers to shut down their servers Friday after cyberattackers smuggled ransomware onto its network platform. Kaseya said Friday evening that it had limited the attack to "a very small percentage of our customers" who use its signature VSA software, "currently estimated at fewer than 40 worldwide." Ransomware attacks typically involve locking away data in systems using encryption, making companies pay to regain access. According to the New Zealand government's Computer Emergency Response Team, the attackers were from a hacking group known as REvil. REvil was also, according to the FBI, behind last month's attack on JBS, one of the world's biggest meat processors, which ended with the Brazil-based company paying bitcoin worth \$11 million to the hackers. US intelligence has blamed recent attacks in US and elsewhere on hackers based in Russian territory.

400,000 facing famine in war-torn Tigray: UN

Over 400,000 people have "crossed the threshold into famine" in Ethiopia's war-torn Tigray region, a senior UN official said Friday, appealing for urgent humanitarian action to help the millions affected by the brutal eight-month long conflict. Fighting between the Ethiopian government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) was reignited last month when the rebels launched a major counter-offensive that saw them retake their regional capital of Mekele. Ramesh Rajasingham, Acting Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, told the UNSC that another 1.8 million people are on the brink of famine.



Amir Khan announces divorce

Bollywood superstar Amir Khan yesterday announced that he is splitting with his wife of 15 years, film-maker Kiran Rao. The A-list couple released a statement saying their break-up had been agreed but they would raise their son together and still work on joint projects. Khan and Rao met while shooting a film in 2001 on which Rao was the assistant director, and they married in December 2005. The 56-year-old actor was divorced from actor Reena Dutta in 2002. Khan and Rao, 47, thanked their family and friends "without whom we would not have been so secure in taking this leap".

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS



Health workers cross the Camana River to inoculate elderly citizens with doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine against Covid-19, in Arequipa, southern Peru, on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

Covaxin 93.4% effective against severe Covid-19

REUTERS

Phase-III trials of a vaccine made by India's Bharat Biotech showed it was 93.4% effective against severe symptomatic Covid-19, the firm said yesterday, a finding that could boost people's acceptance of Covaxin.

The data demonstrated 65.2pc protection against the Delta variant that led to a surge in infections in April and May, and the world's highest daily death tolls.

India's homegrown vaccine also showed effectiveness of 77.8% against symptomatic Covid-19 in the trial.

Bharat Biotech now estimates it will make 23 million doses a month.

The Phase-III data came as Ocugen Inc, which is co-developing Covaxin with Bharat Biotech for the US market, prepares to file a request for full US approval.

India, with a tally of 30.45 million infections, is the second most affected nation after the United States, with 33 million. The south Asian nation's death toll has now crossed 400,000.

World battles Delta variant

Russia sets death record; Indonesia enters lockdown; Iran fears fifth wave

AFP, Moscow

Russia reported its fifth record for daily Covid-19 deaths in a row yesterday, as countries around the world rushed to contain the rapid spread of the highly contagious Delta variant.

The variant has propelled a resurgence of the virus which has already killed nearly four million people, forcing numerous nations to reimpose restrictions well over a year after the pandemic first swept the world.

Thousands of troops and police hit the streets in Indonesia to enforce a partial lockdown imposed yesterday, as the country recorded a record 27,913 new daily cases as well as 493 deaths.

Mosques, restaurants and shopping malls were shuttered in the capital Jakarta, across the main island of Java and on Bali after the daily caseload quadrupled in less than a month, with the Delta variant blamed.

The overwhelmed healthcare system is teetering on the brink of collapse as jammed hospitals turn away patients, forcing desperate families to hunt for oxygen tanks to treat the sick and dying at home.

"The stricter restrictions came too late," said Jakarta resident Maya Puspita Sari.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

"Before, people who got Covid-19 were strangers, but now it's also the people closest to me who are infected... The virus is getting so much closer and it's terrifying."

Elsewhere in Southeast Asia, Myanmar ordered two million people in the second city of Mandalay to stay at home Friday as the coup-hit country struggles to contain coronavirus cases.

New measures were also put into place in Portugal, with an 11 pm to

5 am curfew entering force overnight for nearly half the population in a bid rein in rising Delta infections.

Russia has so far ruled out a new lockdown to fight surging Delta cases, even as it reported 697 more deaths on Saturday -- setting a new nationwide record for the fifth straight day.

Iran, battling the Middle East's deadliest outbreak of the coronavirus, has warned it could be hit by yet another wave of infections.

"It is feared that we are on the way to a fifth wave throughout the country," President Hassan Rouhani told a meeting of Iran's anti-virus taskforce, warning the public to be careful as "the Delta variant has spread" in southern provinces.

The Delta variant, first identified in India and now present in at least 85 countries, has driven outbreaks in places that had previously been able to mostly avoid the pandemic's ravages.

HEATWAVE-FULLED WILDFIRES IN CANADA

Army put on standby to evacuate towns

AFP, Ottawa

Canada's government has warned of a "long and challenging summer" ahead as it prepared military aircraft to help evacuate towns and fight more than 100 wildfires fueled by a record-smashing heat wave.

At least 152 fires were active in the western province of British Columbia, 89 of them sparked in the last two days, according to officials. Most were caused by lightning strikes.

While the immediate blame for the scorching heat in Canada has been placed on a high-pressure "heat dome" trapping warm air in the region, climate change is causing record-setting temperatures to become more frequent.

The response group announced it would set up an operations center in Edmonton, where armed forces will be able to provide logistical support. Military aircraft were also deployed to help.

Roughly 1,000 people have already fled the wildfires in British Columbia, and authorities are searching for many who have gone missing.

Late Friday, the British Columbia medical examiner's office said there had been 719 deaths in the past week, "three times more" than the average number of deaths recorded over this period under normal circumstances. It is believed likely the extreme weather BC has experienced in the past week is a significant contributing factor to the increased number of deaths.

COUP IN MYANMAR

US slaps sanctions on 22, including ministers

AFP, Washington

The United States has imposed fresh sanctions on 22 individuals including four Myanmar government ministers in response to the February military coup and attacks against the country's pro-democracy movement.

In a two-pronged action, the Treasury and Commerce Departments announced the punishments as part of Washington's continued response to the overthrow of Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi's elected government.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement that the new sanctions were levied "in response to the brutal campaign of violence perpetrated by the Burmese military regime and to continue imposing costs in connection with the military coup."

The sanctions do not target the Myanmar people, but are aimed at pressuring the military to "immediately restore Burma's path to democracy," Blinken said.

The sanctions target Myanmar's minister of information Chit Naing, minister for investment Aung Naing Oo, labor and immigration minister Myint Kyaing, and Thet Thet Khine, the minister for social

welfare, relief and resettlement.

Three members of the powerful State Administrative Council were also hit with sanctions, as were 15 spouses and adult children of officials, in an expansion of US punishments imposed in February, March and May following the coup.

Under the sanctions, all US property in the name of the individuals are blocked, and Americans or people in the United States are prohibited from conducting property or interest transactions with them.

The Commerce Department meanwhile slapped sanctions on four business entities: King Royal Technologies Co., which provides satellite communications services supporting the military; and Wanbao Mining and its two subsidiaries, which have revenue-sharing agreements with a company that helps fund the country's defense ministry.

The actions come as Myanmar rejected new figures released by the United Nations, which said there were reports from within the country that security forces have killed at least 883 unarmed people, including at least 40 who are believed to have died in custody.



JULY 04

1934 - Marie Curie, Polish-French physicist and Nobel Prize winner, died.

1946 - Philippines gained independence from United States.

1976 - Israel launched a commando raid on Entebbe airport in Uganda to rescue 102 hostages held by Arab and West German hijackers of an Air France plane.

1994 - French President Francois Mitterrand became the first foreigner to address South Africa's post-apartheid parliament.

1997 - The US Pathfinder space probe landed on Mars.

SOURCE: REUTERS



Houses damaged by a mudslide are seen following heavy rain in Izusan district in Atami, Japan, yesterday. At least two people were feared dead after landslides triggered by heavy rains hit the central Japanese city of Atami, where about 20 people were still missing, public broadcaster NHK said.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Researchers trial magnetic 'lockjaw' against obesity

AFP, Wellington

New Zealand researchers have created a weight-loss device that uses magnets to clamp a patient's jaw together -- hailing it as a new tool against obesity despite critics likening it to an instrument of medieval torture.

The "world-first" innovation involves a dentist fitting magnets and locking bolts to the patient's upper and lower molars, allowing the jaws to open only two millimetres.

Lead researcher Paul Brunton, from the University of Otago's school of health sciences, said this restricted the user to a liquid diet without limiting breathing or speech.

"It is a non-invasive, reversible, economical and attractive alternative to surgical procedures," he said.

"The fact, there are no adverse consequences with this device."

In a paper published in the British Dental journal this month, they said



seven women each lost an average of 6.36 kilograms (1.0 stone) during a two-week trial with the device, called the Dental Slim Diet Control.

It found the patients experienced some initial discomfort but generally found the device "tolerable".

The invention generated a strong response on social media, with many users accusing the researchers of shaming fat people and questioning the ethics of the trial.

One critic called it "repulsive and dehumanising" while another said it risked entrenching unhealthy eating habits.

SECURITY VACUUM IN AFGHANISTAN AFTER FOREIGN FORCES' WITHDRAWAL

Scores killed as fighting rages

AFP, Kabul

Hundreds of Taliban fighters were killed in fierce battles with government forces across several provinces of Afghanistan, officials said yesterday, as Washington announced it would finish withdrawing its troops from the country by the end of August.

Washington's announcement came after all US and Nato troops vacated their main Bagram Air Base, from where the coalition forces led operations for two decades against the Taliban and their al-Qaeda allies.

Over the past 24 hours, more than 300 Taliban fighters were killed in fighting with government forces, the Ministry of Defence said yesterday.

Scores were killed in air strikes, including a pre-dawn assault yesterday, in the southern province of Helmand, where the insurgents and government troops have regularly clashed.

There have been fears that Afghan forces would struggle without the air support that the United States has provided.

"In recent days, the Afghan air force has intensified its air strikes against the Taliban hideouts and the insurgents have suffered casualties," Attaullah Afghan, a member of



province of Badakhshan.

Top US envoy to Kabul, Ross Wilson, lashed out at the insurgents.

"The Taliban is using violent propaganda and hate speech to intimidate, threaten & attack Afghans on social media," Wilson said on Twitter on Saturday.

"Violence and terror cannot create peace." The Pentagon pressed on with its withdrawal to end America's longest war.

The exit of foreign troops from Bagram has further fuelled concerns the country might slide into new civil war, as in the 1990s after the Soviets left.

"I see history repeating. The Americans are doing the same what the Russians did. They are going without ending the war," said Kabul resident Dawood Hotak.

US President Joe Biden attempted to ease these concerns at the White House on Friday. He said the US military is keeping an "over the horizon capacity" which could bring firepower to help the government and its forces if needed.

Media reports say the Pentagon will probably retain about 600 troops in Afghanistan to guard the vast US diplomatic compound in Kabul.