

CONTAGIOUS DISEASES

22.7 million kids missed jabs: UN

REUTERS, Geneva

Nearly 23 million children missed out on routine vaccinations last year due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the highest number in more than a decade, fuelling outbreaks of measles, polio and other preventable diseases, UN agencies said yesterday.

The gap in global vaccination coverage has set up a "perfect storm", leaving more children vulnerable to infectious pathogens just as many countries ease Covid-19 restrictions, the WHO and UN Children's Fund said in an annual report.

Ten countries, led by India and Nigeria, account for the bulk of the 22.7 million children left unvaccinated or under-vaccinated against diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis (DTP) in 2020 - 3.7 million more than in 2019 and the most since 2009, it said regarding a key indicator of childhood vaccination rates.



Rescue workers walk through debris, following heavy rainfalls in Schuld, Germany, yesterday. Heavy rains and floods lashing western Europe have killed at least 42 people in Germany and left many more missing, as rising waters led several houses to collapse yesterday. Unusually heavy rains also inundated neighbouring Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Belgium, where at least four people were reported dead.

PHOTO: REUTERS

NEWS
IN brief

Iran delays nuke talks

Iran is not prepared to resume negotiations on coming back into compliance with the 2015 nuclear deal until Iranian President-elect Ebrahim Raisi's administration has begun, a diplomatic source said on Wednesday. The source, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said Iran had conveyed this to European officials acting as interlocutors in the indirect US-Iranian negotiations and that the current thinking is the Vienna talks will not resume before mid-August. Raisi is expected to formally take charge as president on Aug 5. A US State Department spokesperson confirmed that Iran had asked for more time because of its presidential transition.

Palestinian students arrested

The Israeli army yesterday said it had arrested between 20 and 30 Palestinian students in the occupied West Bank it accused of being "terror operatives" of Islamist group Hamas. Palestinian sources told AFP that dozens of students from Birzeit University were arrested as they were returning by bus from the village of Turmus Ayya. Birzeit University in a statement voiced concern over the fate of its students and condemned the arrests as "a violation of all international laws and norms that guarantee students' right to movement".

Sanctions bite Myanmar Junta

An Israeli-Canadian lobbyist hired by Myanmar's ruling military leaders to represent them in Washington and other capitals said on Wednesday he has stopped his work with the generals because sanctions prevented him from being paid. Ari Ben-Menashe and his Montreal-based firm Dickens & Madson Canada in March signed a \$2 million agreement with a top general and filed foreign lobbying documents with the US Department of Justice, pledging to help the West understand the generals who seized power in the Southeast Asian nation on Feb. 1. During his time working for the generals, Ben-Menashe helped arrange a visit of a CNN reporter to Myanmar.

Cuba restores internet access

Cuban authorities restored internet access on Wednesday following three days of interruptions after unprecedented protests erupted over the weekend, AFP journalists said. But access to social media and messaging apps such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter remained blocked on 3G and 4G. One person has died and more than 100 were arrested, including independent journalists and opposition activists, since the anti-government protests broke out in the communist-ruled island over the worst economic crisis in decades. Cuba has blamed a half-century of US economic pressure for the economic crisis, but the downturn also comes amid strict measures against Covid-19 and a rise in cases.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

SCHOOL COLLAPSE DURING EARTHQUAKE

Negligence of duty lands Mexico man in jail for 208 yrs

REUTERS, Mexico City

A Mexican court has sentenced a man to 208 years in prison for the criminal homicides of 26 people, most of them children, who died when a school collapsed during a powerful earthquake that struck Mexico City in 2017, authorities said on Wednesday.

The Mexico City attorney general's office said it had shown that the man described as a works director had guaranteed the structural safety of the school in Tlalpan, a southern district of the capital, without carrying out the required testing and despite irregularities in the building's construction.

The attorney general's office named the man as Juan "N." Local media identified him as Juan Mario Velarde Garez.

The court also ordered Velarde to pay 377,450 pesos (\$19,000) to each of the victims' families.

Nineteen children and seven adults died when the privately owned Enrique Rebsamen school collapsed during the 7.1-magnitude quake, the most deadly in Mexico in a generation. At least 369 people died in the capital and surrounding states.

Taliban offer 3-month truce

Demand release of 7,000 prisoners, removal of leaders' names from UN blacklist

AGENCIES

The Taliban have offered a three-month ceasefire in exchange for the release of 7,000 insurgent prisoners, an Afghan government negotiator said yesterday, as the militant group continues a sweeping offensive across the country.

"It is a big demand," said Nader Nadery, a key member of the government team involved in peace talks with the Taliban, adding the insurgents also demanded the removal of their leaders' names from a United Nations blacklist.

It was not immediately clear how the government would react to the ceasefire offer, which comes as the United States accelerates the pace of a troop withdrawal due to be finished by August 31.

Nadery's revelation came as Pakistan security forces used tear gas Thursday to disperse hundreds of people who tried to force their way across the border from Chaman to Spin Boldak in Afghanistan.

The border was closed Wednesday by Pakistan officials after the Taliban seized Spin Boldak and raised insurgent flags above the town.



The crossing provides direct access to Pakistan's Balochistan province -- where the Taliban's top leadership has been based for decades -- along with an unknown number of reserve fighters who regularly enter Afghanistan to help bolster their ranks.

Spin Boldak was the latest in a string of border crossings and dry ports seized by the insurgents in recent weeks as they look to choke off revenues much-needed by Kabul while also filling their own coffers.

Muska Dastageer, a lecturer at the American University of Afghanistan, said the Taliban ceasefire offer was a likely attempt by them to consolidate the positions they have gained so swiftly in

recent weeks.

Authorities last year released more than 5,000 Taliban prisoners to help kick start peace talks in Doha, but negotiations have so far failed to reach any political settlement, and the latest offensives suggest the insurgents are now set on a military victory.

Meanwhile, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani yesterday held meeting with regional leaders in Uzbekistan as deteriorating security in his country raises fears of a new Afghan refugee crisis with neighbouring Pakistan already ruling out taking any more.

Several million Afghans have been displaced within their country over years of war, 270,000 of them in fighting since January, according to the UN refugee agency.

Decades of war have driven Afghans out of their country, most into Pakistan to the east and Iran to the west.

Pakistan is home to 1.4 million Afghan refugees while Iran hosts nearly a million, according to UN refugee agency data from the beginning of the year. The number of undocumented Afghans in both countries is estimated to be much higher.



16 JULY

1790 - US Congress declares Washington, DC as new capital.

1935 - The world's first parking meters were installed in Oklahoma City.

1945 - The first atom bomb was successfully tested in Alamogordo, New Mexico.

1969 - Apollo 11 took off on its historic mission to land men on the moon with astronauts Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins aboard.

1999 - A plane carrying John F. Kennedy Jr, his wife and her sister crashed off the Massachusetts island of Martha's Vineyard, killing all on board.

SOURCE: REUTERS

Ominous sign for Earth

Study says global warming, deforestation turn Amazon into source of CO2

AFP, Paris

Climate change and deforestation have flipped a large swathe of the Amazon basin from absorbing to emitting planet-warming CO2, a transformation that could turn humanity's greatest natural ally in the fight against global warming into a foe, researchers reported on Wednesday.

Hundreds of high-altitude air samples collected over the last decade showed that southeastern Amazon, in particular, has shifted from a "sink" to a source of carbon dioxide, the main greenhouse gas, they reported in the journal Nature.

Terrestrial ecosystems worldwide are crucial as the world struggles to curb CO2 emissions, which topped 40 billion tonnes in 2019.

Over the last half century, plants and soil have consistently absorbed more than a quarter of those emissions, even as CO2 pollution increased by 50 percent. The Amazon basin contains about half of the world's tropical rainforests, which are more effective at soaking up and storing carbon than other vegetation.

If Amazonia -- with 450 billion tonnes of CO2 locked in its trees and soil -- were to become a consistent source rather than a "sink" of CO2, tackling the climate crisis would be vastly more challenging.

Since 1970, the region's tropical forests have declined by 17 percent. Climate change itself is also a key factor. Dry-season temperatures have risen by nearly three degrees Celsius compared to pre-industrial levels.

Northwestern Amazon, they found, was in carbon balance, absorbing as much CO2 into the atmosphere as it gave off. But the eastern Amazon -- especially during the dry season -- emitted far more than it absorb.

Another recent study, using different methodology, found that the Brazilian Amazon released nearly 20 percent more CO2 over the last decade than it absorbed from 2010 to 2019.

The Amazon rainforest is one of a dozen so-called "tipping points" in the climate system. Ice sheets atop Greenland and the West Antarctic, Siberian permafrost loaded with CO2 and methane, monsoon rains in South Asia, coral reef ecosystems, the jet stream -- all are vulnerable to point-of-no-return transitions that would radically alter the world as we know it.



An airplane drops fire retardant on the Chuweah Creek Fire as wildfires devastate Nespelam in eastern Washington state, US, on Wednesday. More than a million acres of the western US and Canada were in flames on Wednesday as multiple blazes raged across the region, fueled by soaring temperatures and drought, and with little sign of letting up. Large areas of California were placed on red alert as several conflagrations continued to burn. In Oregon, the Bootleg Fire has already devoured more than 212,758 acres (86,000 hectares forcing many residents to evacuate the area.

PHOTO: REUTERS



Activists rally demanding equitable global access to the Covid-19 vaccine, outside Pfizer World Headquarters in New York City, New York, US, on Wednesday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Sex for clean water!

REUTERS, Brussels

Amnesty International yesterday said that migrants held in Libyan detention camps are subject to horrific sexual violence at the hands of guards, including being forced to barter sex for clean water, food and access to sanitation.

The report, which focused on migrants intercepted in the Mediterranean and who disembarked in Libya in 2020 and 2021, suggests worsening conditions in the camps despite being recently placed under the control of the Libyan interior ministry.

Pope Francis and United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres have called for their closure.

Camp guards say, "maybe you want fresh water and beds ... let me have sex with you, so I can free you," a woman told Amnesty, one of several who said guards inside raped or coerced women into sex in exchange for their release or clean water.

The findings come from interviews with 53 refugees and migrants, aged between 14 and 50, from countries such as Nigeria, Somalia and Syria, mostly who were still in Libya who had been able to flee camps or had access to telephones.

Some pregnant women inside the camps told Amnesty they had been repeatedly raped by guards, while men said they were forced to wear only underwear in an attempt to humiliate them.

S Africa calls up army reserves in bid to crush looting, unrest

AFP, Johannesburg

South Africa yesterday mustered its army reserves in a bid to quell looting that has stoked fears of shortages and dealt a crippling blow to its already battered economy.

"All reserve members are to report for duty at first light tomorrow morning 15 July 2021 at their respective units," army chief Lieutenant-General Lawrence Mbatia said in orders issued overnight as the unrest entered its sixth day.

Soldiers should "report ready with their necessary equipment," the defence ministry said in a statement.

On Wednesday, the government said it would call out around 25,000 troops to tackle the emergency -- 10 times the number that it initially deployed.

As relative calm returned to Johannesburg, Police Minister Bheki Cele

hailed the boost from the military, saying he was confident it would "turn around the volatile situation in parts of KwaZulu-Natal" province, the epicentre of the unrest.

Stores and warehouses in the two provinces have been ransacked, devastating supply chains on which food, fuel and medicines depend in Africa's most industrialised economy.

According to official figures, 72 people have died and more than 1,200 people have been arrested, while South Africa's consumer goods regulatory body estimates that more than 800 shops have been plundered.

The unrest began a day after former president Jacob Zuma -- who commands support from some of the country's poor -- began a 15-month jail term on July 8 for refusing to testify to a commission probing corruption under his tenure.