

Quote of the day



“This has to be verified, but if it is the case, it is completely unacceptable.... Free press is one of the core values of the European Union.”

**EU CHIEF URSULA VON DER LEYEN ON THE SPYWARE SCANDAL INVOLVING AN ISRAELI SOFTWARE FIRM . MEDIA OUTLETS DREW LINKS BETWEEN THE ISRAEL-BASED NSO GROUP, ACCUSED OF SUPPLYING SPYWARE TO GOVERNMENTS, AND A LIST OF THOUSANDS OF SMARTPHONE NUMBERS, INCLUDING THOSE OF ACTIVISTS, JOURNALISTS, BUSINESS EXECUTIVES AND POLITICIANS AROUND THE WORLD.**



Commuters not wearing facemasks cross London Bridge in London yesterday. Virtually all pandemic restrictions were lifted in England yesterday but “freedom day” was met with deep concern from scientists as coronavirus cases surge across the nation -- and around the world. The UK government has decided to implement the final step from their four-step roadmap to end lockdown, Covid restrictions have now been replaced with guidelines urging citizens to deploy personal judgement and responsibility on face masks in indoor settings and caution in large gatherings.

PHOTO: REUTERS

NEWS IN brief

Taiwan approves local Covid jab for emergency use

Taiwan's government yesterday said it had granted emergency-use approval to a coronavirus vaccine made locally by Medigen, with experts saying early data suggested it was similarly effective to AstraZeneca's jabs. The decision is a boost for the island, which has struggled to secure enough vaccines for its 23 million people, reports AFP. Medigen Vaccine Biologics Corp's vaccine -- known officially as MVC-COV1901 -- has yet to finish clinical trials although it published promising phase-two data last month. Taiwan's health ministry said a panel of experts approved its use on Sunday and that the first inoculations for the public could begin as early as August.

Flood death toll rises to 165 in Germany

The death toll from Germany's worst floods in living memory rose to 165 yesterday as emergency services continued to comb through decimated towns in search of dozens of people still missing. A deluge of rain fell over western Germany over two days last week, sending torrents of water rushing down streets, sweeping away trees, cars and sheds, and destroying swathes of housing. Many victims have been found dead in sodden cellars after attempting to retrieve valuables, while others were swept away by the sheer force of the water, reports AFP. Emergency workers have been out in force to assess damaged buildings and clear debris.



Pakistan bus crash kills 28 ahead of Muslim holiday

At least 28 people were killed yesterday when a bus packed with people heading home for the Muslim Eid al-Adha holiday in Pakistan crashed into a truck, officials said. The accident happened around 100 kilometres (60 miles) from Multan, in Punjab province. Government official Shezad ul-Islam said 40 people were injured in the accident, and the death toll was likely to rise as some were in critical condition. Eid al-Adha is one of the biggest celebrations on the Muslim calendar, when families slaughter animals and share the meat with the poor, reports AFP. Huge numbers of people have been crossing the country in recent days to return home to their families. Pakistan has a terrible traffic safety record with thousands of accidents a year due to substandard roads, poorly maintained vehicles and reckless driving.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

Afghan peace talks fail

Rivals agree to meet again after inconclusive meeting in Doha; foreign missions in Afghanistan call for Taliban ceasefire

REUTERS, Kabul

Fifteen diplomatic missions and the Nato representative in Afghanistan urged the Taliban yesterday to halt their military offensives just hours after the rival Afghan sides failed to agree on a ceasefire at a peace meeting in Doha.



A delegation of Afghan leaders met the Taliban's political leadership in the Qatari capital over the weekend but the Taliban, in a said in a statement late on Sunday, made no mention of a halt to Afghanistan's escalating violence.

"This Eid al-Adha, the Taliban should lay down their weapons for good and show the world their commitment to the peace process," the 15 missions and the Nato representative said, referring to today's Muslim holiday in Afghanistan. This time there has been no

The statement was supported by Australia, Canada, the Czech Republic, Denmark, the European Union delegation, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Korea, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Britain and the United States and Nato's senior civilian representative.

Over recent Eid holidays, the Taliban have called short ceasefires, saying they wanted to let Afghans spend them in peace.

such announcement as the Taliban made swift territorial gains in near-unprecedented levels of fighting nationwide as US-led foreign forces complete their withdrawal after 20 years of fighting.

Yesterday's statement also condemned rights violations, such as efforts to shut schools and media outlets in areas recently captured by the Taliban.

In Doha, political leaders and the Taliban discussed a political settlement to end the conflict, the chairman of a council for peace, Abdullah Abdullah, who took part in the talks, said yesterday.

"We agreed to continue the talks, seek a political settlement to the current crisis, avoid civilian casualties, facilitate humanitarian assistance and medical supplies to tackle Covid-19 pandemic," he said on Twitter.

ISRAELI MALWARE PEGASUS

Indian ministers, opp leaders among 'targets'

AGENCIES

Spyware Pegasus, which is sold by the NSO Group of Israel, may have been used to conduct surveillance on about 300 Indians, including two serving Cabinet ministers at the Centre, three opposition leaders, a Constitutional authority, government officials, scientists and about 40 journalists, according to French media nonprofit, Forbidden Stories, and Amnesty International.

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, election strategist Prashant Kishor and Union IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw are the big names revealed as potential targets of Israeli spyware 'Pegasus' in the second set of explosive revelations by The Wire.

Apart from opposition leaders like Rahul Gandhi and Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's nephew Abhishek Banerjee, the latest reveal, according to The Wire, includes two current Union Ministers, Prahlad Patel and Ashwini Vaishnaw. Vaishnaw, who joined Prime Minister Narendra Modi's cabinet recently, is IT Minister. He was an MP at the time when the names were targeted - 2018 and 2019.

Vaishnaw defended the government in parliament earlier yesterday, saying there was "no substance" behind the sensational claim. It was "no coincidence" that the news broke a day before the start of the monsoon session of parliament, he said.



- JULY 20**
- 1944** - German officers made an unsuccessful attempt to assassinate Adolf Hitler by planting a bomb under a table in the Nazi leader's "Wolf's Lair" headquarters in East Prussia.
- 1969** - One giant leap for mankind with Moon landing.
- 1989** - Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest for her outspoken attacks on the country's military rulers.
- 2001** - In Italy, anti-globalisation protester Carlo Giuliani was shot dead by a paramilitary policeman.

SOURCE: REUTERS

US, allies condemn China for 'malicious' cyber activity

AFP, Washington

The United States yesterday led allies in a fierce condemnation of China over allegedly "malicious" cyber activity, accusing it of criminal extortion, issuing ransom demands to private firms and threatening national security.

In comments likely to further strain worsening relations between Washington and Beijing, a senior US official said that China's "irresponsible behavior in cyberspace is inconsistent with its stated objective of being seen as a responsible leader in the world."

The United States, the European Union, Britain, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Japan and Nato were united against the threat, the US official said, and would expose how China targets international cyber networks.

China's Ministry of State Security "uses criminal contract hackers to conduct unsanctioned cyber operations globally, including for their own personal profit," the official said.

"Their operations include criminal activities such as cyber-enabled extortion, crypto-jacking, and theft from victims

around the world for financial gain.

"We're aware of reports that PRC (China) government-affiliated cyber operators have conducted ransom operations against private companies that have included ransom demands with millions of dollars."

Later yesterday, the US-led alliance was due to announce details of action against China over the alleged cyber misconduct, and to reveal 50 "tactics, techniques and procedures Chinese state-sponsored cyber actors use."

The official said US allies were sharing technical advice on how to confront China, as Beijing's cyber security behavior "poses a major threat to the US and allies' economic and national security."

The United States will also today formally accuse cyber actors affiliated to China's Ministry of State Security of conducting the massive Microsoft Exchange Server hack disclosed in March.

The hack, which exploited flaws in the Microsoft Exchange service, affected at least 30,000 US organizations including local governments and was already attributed to an "unusually aggressive" Chinese cyber-espionage campaign.

PEGASUS SPYWARE: HOW DOES IT WORK?

Governments around the world are facing bombshell allegations that they used Israeli-made malware to spy on the phones of activists, journalists, corporate executives and politicians. But how exactly does the Pegasus spyware work? How does it get onto people's phones -- and what can it do once it's there?

HOW DOES PEGASUS SNEAK?

Researchers believe that early versions of the hacking software, first detected in 2016, used booby-trapped text messages to install itself onto the phones of targets. The recipient would have to click on a link in the message in order for the spyware to download.

But this limited the chances of a successful installation -- particularly as phone users have grown increasingly wary of clicking on suspicious links. More recent versions of Pegasus, developed by the Israeli firm the NSO Group, have exploited weak spots in software commonly installed on mobiles.

In 2019 the messaging service WhatsApp sued NSO, saying it used one of these so-called "zero-day vulnerabilities" in its operating system to install the spyware on some 1,400 phones.

By simply calling the target through WhatsApp, Pegasus could secretly download itself onto their phone -- even if they never answered the call.

More recently, Pegasus is reported to have exploited weaknesses in Apple's iMessage software. That would potentially give it access to the one billion Apple iPhones currently in use -- all without the owners needing to even

click a button.

WHAT DOES THE MALWARE DO?

"Pegasus is probably one of the most capable remote access tools there is," said Alan Woodward, cybersecurity professor at the University of Surrey in the UK. "Think of it as



if you've put your phone in someone else's hands."

It can be used to read the target's messages and emails, look through the photos they've taken, eavesdrop on their calls, track their location and even film them through their camera.

Pegasus' developers have got "better and better at hiding" all trace of the software, making it difficult to confirm whether a

particular phone has been bugged or not, Woodward said.

However, Amnesty International's Security Lab, one of the organisations investigating Pegasus, said it had found traces of successful attacks on Apple iPhones as recently as this month. Woodward said Apple, which prides itself on a reputation for security, had "made some fairly big efforts" to identify weak spots. But "inevitably there will be one or two" flaws in such complex software.

IS IT POSSIBLE TO REMOVE THE SPYWARE?

Since it's extremely difficult to know for sure if your phone is carrying the malware, it's also difficult to know definitively that it has been removed. Woodward said Pegasus may install itself onto the phone's hardware or into its memory, depending on the version.

If it's stored in the memory, rebooting the phone could in theory wipe it off -- so he recommended that people at risk of being targeted, such as business leaders and politicians, regularly switch their devices off and on again. "It sounds like overkill to a lot of people, but there is anti-malware software out there for mobile devices," he added.

SOURCE: AFP

Russia test fires Zircon hypersonic cruise missile

AFP, Moscow

Russia said yesterday it had carried out another successful test of its Zircon hypersonic cruise missile, a new addition to an arsenal of weapons called "invincible" by President Vladimir Putin.

Moscow has in recent years touted the development of futuristic weapons which it hopes will give it the edge in any arms race with the United States. Footage distributed by the defence ministry showed the Admiral Gorshkov warship launching the cruise missile at a target on the Barents Sea coast in northern Russia.

"The Zircon missile successfully hit a target directly at a range of over 350 kilometres. The flight speed reached nearly Mach 7," the ministry said. Putin revealed the development of the new weapon in a state of the nation address in February 2019, saying it could hit targets at sea and on land with a range of 1,000 kilometres and a speed of Mach 9.

The defence ministry has said it plans to equip both warships and submarines with the Zircon. The missile has undergone several recent tests and in October last year Putin described one of the test firings as a "great event not just in the life of our armed forces but for all of Russia".

Helping homeland in hour of need

FROM PAGE 1

US government through the Covax facility, a worldwide initiative aimed at ensuring equitable access to Covid-19 vaccines. Bangladesh will only have to pay the transportation cost for the vaccines.

Meanwhile, the second consignment of 30 lakh shots of Moderna Covid-19 vaccine arrived last night.

One of the team members, Prof Masudul Hassan, shared with The Daily Star what prompted them to take the initiative and the challenges that came along.

"We fought for Bangladesh's independence and we must play our part in its critical hour. Our initiative is a part of the obligations we have as freedom fighters," he said over the phone.

Asked how the initiative began, Prof Masudul said Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen called him around three months ago, seeking help to get vaccines. "He [foreign minister] said they had contacted the US administration to get 70 lakh doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, but to no avail. He asked whether we, as Bangladeshi-Americans, could do anything about the vaccine issue."

Covax is an international cooperative programme formed to make sure low- and middle-income countries have fair access to Covid-19 vaccines. Covax is led by the United Nations World Health Organization; Gavi,

a vaccine alliance; and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations or CEPI.

Prof Masudul said they have been working under the leadership of Prof Choudhury Hafiz Ahsan ever since Bangladesh started facing a crisis of vaccines.

"The main challenge to get the vaccine was to join the vaccine distribution team of the [US president] Biden administration. It was very difficult for us. Vice President Kamala Harris helped Prof Hafiz join there. Prof Hafiz made every effort to include Bangladesh's name in the list of countries to get the vaccines. Finally, Bangladesh's name was included in the list of 18 countries," he said.

More than 180 countries are members of the Covax facility and the US selected only 18 countries for sending the vaccines for free.

Prof Masudul said a discussion on Bangladesh procuring vaccines from the United States was also going on. "When we showed interest in purchasing vaccines, the Biden administration informed us that there was no need to buy the vaccine as 25 lakh doses will be provided through the Covax free of cost. Bangladesh will continue to get the vaccine in phases," he said.

At that time, the US administration wanted to give 10 lakh shots of Oxford-AstraZeneca's vaccine. But that did not happen because the jobs expired and thereby were destroyed, he added.

This time, he said, only two out of

18 countries have received the vaccines. Bangladesh received 30 lakh doses and Ukraine got 10 lakh.

Asked about the number of vaccine doses Bangladesh would get from the US through the Covax facility, Prof Masudul said, "In the vaccine application, there was no mention of the number of jobs the country will get. Since we are the members of the vaccine distribution team, Bangladesh will get as many vaccines as provided by the US under Covax."

Replying to a question, he said, "The vaccines Bangladesh is getting are being given for free. We have all the information and evidence in this regard."

Expressing concern over the deteriorating Covid situation in Bangladesh, Prof Masudul said they had taken some more short- and long-term initiatives to help the Bangladeshi people.

"Initiatives have already been taken to send 400 ventilators to Bangladesh. The Vaccine Distribution Committee received 1,000 ventilators from the US. Of those, Bangladesh is to get 400 and India the rest," he said.

He informed this daily that 150 ventilators have already reached the Birdem Hospital in Dhaka. The remaining 250 are now at the Delhi Airport and Bangladesh will collect those in a couple of days.

"Although the price of each ventilator

is \$15,000, we are getting it for free. The Bangladesh government will have to bear only \$100 for each in transportation costs," he added.

Speaking on the long-term initiatives, Prof Masudul said they would work for the production of vaccines in Bangladesh. "We have come a long way in vaccine production."

He hoped that a Bangladeshi company in a joint venture with a European company would be able to start vaccine production in the country by the end of this year.

Ghana became the first country in the world to receive vaccines under the Covax facility in February. Since then, Covax has distributed more than 81 million doses in more than 120 countries around the world, including in Bangladesh, Brazil, Ethiopia and Fiji.

The US will provide 500 million doses of Pfizer as a grant. According to the list of vaccine recipient countries published by Covax early this year, Bangladesh was supposed to get 1.27 crore doses of Covid-19 vaccine by the end of June. But the vaccine supply hit a snag after India suspended exporting vaccines produced by Serum Institute of India, which was the highest supplier of the vaccines to the Covax facility.

As a result, Covax had to make major changes in its overall vaccination plan around the world.