

STUDY ON SEVEN COVID VACCINES

# Third dose can boost immunity

AFP, Paris

Seven jabs used as boosters against Covid-19 mostly produced a strong immune response, though results varied depending on the vaccine combination, a study said yesterday.

Last June researchers in the UK looked at about 3,000 people to compare various combinations of jabs and their effects after a third dose.

Patients in the study, published in leading medical journal The Lancet, had been fully vaccinated either with AstraZeneca or Pfizer/BioNTech.

At least two months after the second dose of Pfizer and three months for AstraZeneca, they received a third jab either of those two shots or CureVac, Moderna, Novavax, Valneva or Janssen.

Other participants received a placebo.

In nearly all patients except for those who received a placebo, participants produced an increased antibody response -- with the exception of initial vaccination by Pfizer followed by a Valneva booster, which showed no noticeable difference.

"All of the vaccines that boosted immunity did so in older and younger people; however, there were marked differences in response between specific booster vaccines, consistent with other data from non-randomised studies," the study said.

There were several limits to the study.

The third doses were administered soon after the second dose -- sometimes less time elapsed between the second and third doses than between the first and second ones, which could have reduced immunity.



Municipality marshals fine passengers upon failing to comply with the Covid-19 coronavirus safety protocols at a railway station during an enforcement drive in Bangalore, India yesterday. India expects the Omicron variant of coronavirus to cause less severe disease, the health ministry said yesterday, thanks to vaccinations and high prior exposure to the Delta variant that infected nearly 70 percent of the population by July.

PHOTO: AFP

OMICRON VARIANT

# WHO has no reports yet of deaths

AFP, Geneva

The World Health Organization said yesterday it had not seen any reports of deaths relating to the new Omicron variant of Covid-19.

The WHO said it was collecting evidence about the variant of concern (VOC), as countries around the world scramble to stop it from spreading.

But despite a growing number of countries registering infections with the new variant, no deaths have yet been reported to the UN health agency. "I have not seen reports of Omicron-related deaths yet," WHO spokesman Christian Lindmeier told reporters in Geneva.

"We're collecting all the evidence and we will find much more evidence as we go along."

While Omicron has rattled the world, Lindmeier also urged people to be mindful of the Delta variant.

Quote of the day



"We're going to fight this variant with science and speed, not chaos and confusion. This is a moment we can put the divisiveness behind us, I hope."

US PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN ON FIGHT AGAINSTOMICRON COVID VARIANT

# Iran nuke talks set for pause

European diplomats express 'disappointment and concern' at the latest proposals from Tehran

AFP, Tehran

Negotiations in Vienna aimed at reviving the Iran nuclear deal were set to be suspended yesterday, Iranian media said, as European diplomats expressed "disappointment and concern" at the latest proposals from Iran.

The semi-official ISNA news agency said the talks would "most likely" resume on Monday but French President Emmanuel Macron warned there could be a longer break in the talks, which resumed only on November 29 after a five-month break.

Iran said it has submitted two draft proposals for the nuclear agreement, which has been in tatters since the US withdrew in 2018.

"After the handing over of the text of the Iranian proposal to the P4+1 group (Britain, China, France and Russia plus Germany) and the European Union, a meeting of the joint committee of the nuclear deal



will be held on Friday," said Iran's official news agency IRNA.

"This meeting was requested by the European side before its representatives return to their capitals to review the text proposed by Iran," the news agency added.

Senior diplomats from the E3 group of Britain, France and Germany yesterday expressed "disappointment and concern after thoroughly and carefully analysing Iranian proposed changes to the text negotiated during the previous six rounds", which took place earlier this year.

And speaking on a visit to the United Arab Emirates, just across the Gulf from Iran, the French president said it "should not be excluded" that this round of talks "does not reopen swiftly".

On Thursday, Iran's lead negotiator Ali Bagheri said the proposals concerned two main issues facing the 2015 accord known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA. "The first document sums up the Islamic republic's point of view concerning the lifting of sanctions, while the second is about Iran's nuclear actions," Bagheri told state television.

"Now the other side must examine these documents and prepare itself to hold negotiations with Iran based on these documents."

In a telephone call with EU top diplomat Josep Borrell, Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian said the talks were going well "but slowly on all tracks".

# Afghan women's rights must be 'enforced'

Taliban release decree in the name of supreme leader

AFP, Kabul

The Taliban yesterday issued a decree in the name of their supreme leader instructing Afghan ministries "to take serious action" on women's rights, but failed to mention girls' access to schools.

The move comes after the Islamists seized power in mid-August and as they seek to restore Afghanistan's access to billions of dollars in assets and aid suspended when the previous, Western-backed regime collapsed in the final stages of a US military withdrawal.

"The Islamic Emirate's leadership directs all relevant organisations... to take serious action to enforce Women's Rights," the decree states, quoting elusive supreme leader Hibatullah Akhundzada.

The decree centres on marriage and widows' rights, stating "no one can force women to marry by coercion or pressure" and that a widow is entitled to an unspecified fixed share of her husband's



inheritance.

It instructs the Ministry of Culture and Information to publish material on women's rights "to prevent... ongoing repression".

Respect for women's rights has repeatedly been cited by key global donors as a condition for restoring aid.

The decree crucially makes no mention of girls' secondary education -- which has been suspended for millions -- or the employment of women, who have been barred from returning to jobs in the public sector.



Migrants from Central America sit on freight cars and railroads as they wait for the departure of a freight train to continue their journey towards Mexico City, in Tierra Blanca, Veracruz, Mexico on Thursday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

# Russian offensive possible in Jan: Ukraine minister

AFP, Kiev

Ukraine warned yesterday that Russia could launch a large-scale attack on the country in late January as tensions soar over an alleged Russian troop build-up near Kiev's borders.

The United States and its allies have for weeks accused Russia of planning an invasion of Ukraine and massing troops along Kiev's borders.

Moscow seized Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 and has since backed separatists fighting Kiev in eastern Ukraine. The conflict has left more than 13,000 dead. Russia denies planning an attack.

"The most likely time to reach readiness for escalation will be the end of January," Ukrainian Defence Minister Oleksiy Reznikov said.

Addressing parliament, Reznikov said Ukrainian intelligence was analysing all possible scenarios.

"The possibility of a large-scale escalation from Russia exists," he warned. The minister said a "winter training period" had started in Russia and that Moscow had already launched exercises near Ukrainian territory.

He estimated that Russia had around 100,000 troops near Ukraine's border, in Moscow-controlled Crimea and in

separatist-held areas in eastern Ukraine.

The United States this week said it had "evidence" Russia could be planning an invasion, threatening Moscow with economic sanctions if it attacks. Russia has dismissed the allegations as "hysteria".

Reznikov said escalation was a "likely scenario".

He said Ukraine and its allies should make the cost of a possible attack "unacceptable for the aggressor."

He reiterated that Ukraine was seeking a "political-diplomatic settlement" to the tensions and that it would not carry out "military provocations."

Ukraine and its Western allies accuse Russia of sending troops and arms across the border to support the separatists -- claims Moscow denies.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken warned Moscow on Thursday of the "severe costs" Russia would pay in case of an escalation, urging his Russian counterpart to seek a diplomatic exit from the crisis.

Blinken said it was likely that Presidents Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin would speak soon. Work is under way to arrange a video call between them, the Kremlin said yesterday, a day after their top diplomats met to discuss Ukraine.



DECEMBER 4

1991 - The American journalist Terry Anderson, the Western hostage held longest by Islamic militants in Lebanon, was freed after 2,454 days. He had been seized on March 16, 1985.

1997 - A historic treaty to ban anti-personnel landmines worldwide became reality when 121 nations signed it in Ottawa; the US was among the abstainers.

1998 - The last Khmer Rouge fighters surrendered, ending a 20-year war against the Cambodian government.

SOURCE: REUTERS

# US proposes 'code of conduct' at UN for killer robots

AFP, Geneva

Rejecting calls for a binding agreement regulating or banning the use of weapons often dubbed killer robots, Washington instead proposed at the United Nations on Thursday a "code of conduct".

Speaking at a meeting in Geneva focused on finding common ground on the use of such so-called lethal autonomous weapons, a US official balked at the idea of regulating their use through a "legally-binding instrument".

The meeting saw governmental experts preparing for high-level talks at a review conference on the Convention of Certain Conventional Weapons from December 13-17.

"In our view, the best way to make progress... would be through the development of a non-binding code of conduct," US official Josh Dorosin told the meeting.

The United Nations has been hosting diplomatic talks in Geneva since 2017 aimed at reaching an agreement on how to address the use of killer robots.

Activists and a number of countries have called for an all-out ban on any weapons that could use lethal force without a human overseeing the process and making the final kill order. In November 2018, UN chief Antonio Guterres joined the call for a ban, but so far countries do not even agree on whether there is a need to regulate the weapons.

During Thursday's debate, a number of countries, including India and the United States, criticised the idea of a legally-binding agreement.

# Philippines court to allow Nobel laureate Ressa to go to Norway

REUTERS, Manila

Philippine journalist Maria Ressa will be allowed to travel so she can accept her Nobel Peace Prize in person after a court gave her permission to leave the Southeast Asian country to visit Norway later this month.

Ressa, who is subject to travel restrictions due to the legal cases she faces in the Philippines, shared the Peace Prize with Russian investigative journalist Dmitry Muratov, in an endorsement of free speech under fire worldwide.

The prize is the first Nobel Peace Prize for journalists since the German Carl von Ossietzky won it in 1935 for revealing his country's secret post-war rearmament programme. In its ruling yesterday, the Philippine Court of Appeals granted Ressa's request to travel to receive the award on December 10, noting that "she is not a flight risk."

The Norwegian Nobel Committee has decided this year's award ceremony will be an in-person event taking place in Oslo City Hall. Ressa's news site, Rappler, has had its licence suspended and she is embroiled in various legal cases. Supporters say she is being targeted due to her scrutiny of government policies, including a war on drugs launched by President Rodrigo Duterte.



# UN launches 'bodyright' symbol against online violence

AFP, United Nations

The United Nations on Thursday launched a campaign against gender-based violence on the internet, complete with the symbol which can be added to social media posts.

The symbol seeks to highlight that corporate logos and copyrighted Intellectual Property often receive greater protection online than people.

The UN population agency UNFPA's "bodyright" campaign said women, young people, ethnic minorities and the LGBTB community had to be protected against online violence.

"Everyone has the right to live free of fear and violence -- both online and offline," UNFPA executive director Natalia Kanem said.

"It's time for technology companies and policymakers to take digital violence seriously."

Eighty five percent of women globally have experienced or witnessed digital violence against other women, according to a poll by the Economist Intelligence Unit, and 38 percent have suffered it themselves.

UNFPA said online violence included cyberstalking, hate speech, doxing -- publishing private information about an individual -- and non-consensual use of images and video such as deepfakes.

It said the symbol was a demand that "images of our bodies are given the same respect and protection online as copyright gives to music, film and even corporate logos."