

Quote of the day



There will be no talks on European security without our European allies and partners. ... We've managed to engage Russia over strategic concerns for decades. There's no reason we can't do that moving forward to reduce instability, but we're going to do that in partnership and coordination with our European allies and partners.

WHITE HOUSE PRESS SECRETARY JEN PSAKI AFTER RUSSIA CALLS FOR URGENT TALKS



Unemployed Tunisian graduates chant slogans during a demonstration to mark the 11th anniversary of the start of the 2011 revolution, yesterday, in Sidi Bouzid, stronghold of the Tunisian revolution. Hundreds rallied for and against Tunisian President Kais Saied in central Tunis, on the eleventh anniversary of the start of a revolution that sparked the Arab Spring uprisings.

PHOTO: AFP

MORE NEWS

US hits China with new trade curbs over Uyghurs

The United States on Thursday unleashed a volley of actions to censure China's treatment of the Uyghur minority, with lawmakers voting to curb trade and new sanctions slapped on the world's top consumer drone maker. The United States has ramped up pressure on China, with President Joe Biden's administration a day earlier targeting producers of painkillers that contributed to America's addiction crisis. The US Senate unanimously voted to make the United States the first country to ban virtually all imports from China's Xinjiang region over forced labor concerns. An estimated 20 percent of garments imported into the US each year include some cotton from Xinjiang. Rights experts and the US government say more than one million Uyghurs and other Turkic-speaking Muslims are incarcerated in camps in an effort to root out their Islamic traditions and forcibly assimilate them into China's Han majority.

Malaysian ex-PM Mahathir admitted to hospital

Former Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad, 96, was admitted to hospital Thursday and will undergo a full medical check-up, the medical facility said. The National Heart Institute said Mahathir arrived at 7:00 pm and is expected to stay there for the next few days. It did not say why he had been admitted and his aides declined to give further details. Mahathir has had heart problems in the past, suffering several heart attacks and undergoing bypass surgery. He has been one of Malaysia's most dominant political figures in recent decades, serving twice as prime minister for a total of 24 years.



US Senate confirms Burns as China envoy after delay

The US Senate on Thursday confirmed veteran diplomat Nicholas Burns as ambassador to Beijing, filling a position vacant for more than a year despite Washington's growing focus on China. The Senate reached the key 50-vote threshold to approve Burns in an ongoing confirmation that took place after Senator Marco Rubio lifted objections. The final vote was 75-18. Burns, a former US ambassador to Greece and Nato, at his Senate hearing in October called China an "aggressor" in the region and vowed to "compete vigorously," while also seeking cooperation on areas such as climate change. The 65-year-old served as the State Department's number three official under former president George W. Bush and as the spokesperson of the department under Bill Clinton. Burns retired from the Foreign Service in 2008 and became a professor at Harvard University.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

G7: Omicron 'biggest threat' to world health

Biden warns of 'winter of death' for unvaccinated; S Africa reports less serious cases

AGENCIES

US President Joe Biden warned Thursday of a "winter of severe illness and death" for those unvaccinated against Covid-19, as the G7 called the Omicron variant the biggest threat to global public health.

The stark words came as Britain saw more than 88,000 Covid-19 infections, a second consecutive record daily number, prompting France to impose "drastic" new limits on travel to the UK.

Scientists remain uncertain how dangerous the highly mutated Omicron variant is, but early data suggests it can be more resistant to vaccines and is more transmissible than the Delta variant.

Yesterday South Africa, where the variant first reported, said though infection rates are soaring across South Africa as a result of the Omicron variant, fewer people have died or required hospital treatment compared to previous waves of Covid.

Countries worldwide have begun advising against foreign travel while ramping up domestic restrictions to battle Omicron.

The G7 on Thursday called the variant the "biggest current threat to global public health", saying its emergence meant it was "more important than ever" for countries to closely cooperate and share data.

Biden's warning about the winter came as he urged Americans who have had two shots to get boosters.

OMICRON CAN FOOL ANTIBODIES, NOT OTHERS

In the fight against the coronavirus, one key component of the human immune system has hogged the limelight: antibodies.

These Y-shaped proteins have made top news recently because Covid-19 shots don't produce as many of them that work against the heavily mutated Omicron variant compared to past strains -- at least, not without a booster.

Trained by both vaccines and infection, antibodies grab on to the spike protein that studs the surface of the coronavirus, stopping it from penetrating cells and sickening the host.

But while antibodies are rightly celebrated, they're not the only game in town.

In fact, "there's a complex and coordinated response that is really beautiful from an evolutionary standpoint," Harvard immunologist Roger Shapiro explains.

In the minutes and hours after the virus first comes calling, signaling proteins send out alarms to recruit the tough-but-dim brutes of the "innate" immune system.

First to the scene are "neutrophils," which make up 50 to 70 percent of all white cells and are quick to fight, but also to perish.

Others include hungry "macrophages" that snarf down pathogens and spit out key bits to help train their smarter colleagues, menacingly

named "Natural Killer" cells and "dendritic" cells that pass on their intel to more elite fighters.

If the invaders aren't driven off, the "adaptive" immune system comes into play.

A few days into a first infection, "B cells" wise up to the threat and start pumping out antibodies. Vaccination also trains B cells -- mainly inside lymph nodes in our armpits, near the site of injection -- to be primed and ready.

Shapiro likened them to intelligence operatives, holding vital information about threats.

The most potent kinds of antibodies, known as "neutralizing," are like chewing gum sticking to the business end of a key, stopping it from unlocking a door.

B cells' key partners are "T cells," which can be broadly split into "helpers" and "killers."

"Killers are like assassins, and they go and attack the cells that have been infected," said Shapiro -- but these assassins also inflict collateral damage for the sake of the greater good.

The helper T cells "are like generals," added Shapiro, marshaling troops, spurring B cells to up their production and directing their lethal counterparts toward the enemy.

Because of its heavily mutated spike

protein, the Omicron variant may more easily slip by neutralizing antibodies conferred by prior infection or vaccination. The bad news is this makes people more prone to symptomatic infection. But the good news is that T cells aren't nearly as easily fooled.

T cells are much better at recognizing tell-tale signs of foes they've encountered before, even if their clever disguises get them past antibodies.

The killer T cells carry out search-and-destroy missions, poking holes in infected cells, bursting them open, and triggering reactions to bring inflammatory proteins known as "cytokines" to the fight.

Depending on the speed of the response, a vaccinated person with a breakthrough infection might get mild, cold-like symptoms, or moderate, flu-like symptoms -- but the chances of severe disease are drastically reduced.

None of this detracts from the case for boosters, which skyrocket the production of all types of antibodies, and also seem to further train B and T cells.

"Omicron is concerning, but the glass is still half-full -- it's not totally going to evade our responses," Wherry said.

SOURCE: AFP



THIS DAY IN HISTORY

DECEMBER 18

218 BC - Second Punic War: Battle of the Trebia - Hannibal's Carthaginian army heavily defeat Roman forces on Italian soil.

1271 - Kublai Khan renames his empire "Yuan", marking the start of the Yuan Dynasty of China.

1865 - Slavery abolished in America with adoption of 13th amendment.

1916 - The Battle of Verdun in World War One ended after 10 months, leaving 543,000 French and 434,000 German troops dead.

SOURCE: REUTERS

European stores pull products linked to Brazil deforestation

AFP, Paris

Several European supermarket chains are dropping Brazilian beef products linked to destruction of the Amazon rainforest and tropical wetland, the US activist group Mighty Earth said Thursday.

Chains such as Carrefour Belgium have committed to pulling from their shelves corned beef, beef jerky and fresh prime cuts suspected to come from cattle raised in the Amazon and the Pantanal tropical wetlands.

The move came after a Mighty Earth investigation in partnership with Reporter Brasil, a Brazilian non-government organisation founded by journalists, highlighted links between Sao Paulo manufacturing plants of Brazilian meat-processing giants JBS, Marfrig and Minerva and deforestation.

Activists have long criticised the environmental footprint of the global meat industry, blaming it for some two-thirds of global biodiversity loss.

It has also accused meat processing firms of not delivering on promises to end deforestation in their supply chains.

Carrefour withdrew Jack Link's brand

beef jerky, a pledge also made by Belgian supermarket Delhaize, and Auchan of France similarly said it would be removing beef jerky products linked to JBS.

Mighty Earth said other chains including Albert Heijn in the Netherlands, Lidl, Sainsbury's and Princes in Britain were taking similar initiatives.

The measures come as the European Union brings in new legislation designed to fight deforestation. Mighty Earth director Nico Muzi said in a statement he saw the "noose tightening" around the necks of those involved in deforestation.

Brazil's top beef exporters defended their environmental records.

JBS, the world's biggest meat company, said it had "no tolerance" for illegal deforestation and had "proactively blocked" more than 14,000 suppliers to date.

The Amazon is the world's largest tropical rainforest. Deforestation, after falling for several years, has risen since far-right President Jair Bolsonaro came to power in 2019.

Brazil's National Institute for Space Research said last month deforestation had hit a 15-year high this year. The vast majority of the cleared land is used for cattle ranching.



Palestinian residents of the West Bank village of Burqah confront Israeli soldiers yesterday, after reported attacks by Israeli settlers on the village. Israeli soldiers carried out a massive manhunt in the occupied West Bank after a Palestinian shooting attack on a car that resulted in one Israeli dead and two others wounded.

PHOTO: AFP



German Health Minister Karl Lauterbach vaccinates ten-year-old Frida at the vaccination centre at the Zoo in Hanover yesterday as the vaccination of children aged 5 to 11 against the Covid-19 virus started this week in Germany.

PHOTO: AFP

'I take personal responsibility'

Pressure mounts on embattled UK PM after by-election disaster

AFP, Shrewsbury

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson yesterday faced questions about his leadership after weeks of controversy culminated in a crushing by-election defeat in a constituency never previously lost by his Conservative Party.

His ruling Tories had held the seat in North Shropshire, central England, by a massive majority just two years ago, but saw that wiped out Thursday by the Liberal Democrats in a historic loss set to intensify the mutinous mood among Conservative MPs.

"I take personal responsibility," Johnson said in a clip for television news, calling the vote "very disappointing".

"In all humility, I've got to accept that that verdict," he added, insisting he understood "people's frustrations" and "what the voters are saying in North Shropshire".

The 57-year-old was already reeling from a series of scandals and setbacks,



including around 100 of his lawmakers rebelling in parliament Tuesday against the government's introduction of vaccine passes for large events.

His authority has also been hit repeatedly in recent weeks by claims of corruption and reports that he and his staff broke coronavirus restrictions last Christmas, while a new surge in Omicron cases have added to his woes.

The government reported nearly 89,000 new infections Thursday, the second consecutive record daily tally.

The Tories lost the safe rural seat, where they had a 23,000-strong majority since 2019, by almost 6,000 votes as the Lib Dems enjoyed a swing of 34 percentage points.

"The people of North Shropshire have spoken on behalf of the British people," winning candidate Helen Morgan said in her victory speech.

"They have said loudly and clearly: 'Boris Johnson, the party is over'.

"Your government, run on lies and bluster, will be held accountable... it will be challenged and it can and will be defeated."

The shattering defeat drew an immediate backlash from some Tory MPs and predictions that letters of no-confidence in their leader could be dispatched to trigger an internal party vote to remove him.

The same process saw his predecessor Theresa May ousted in mid-2019 after MPs, including Johnson, voted against her Brexit deal in parliament.

Ukraine soldier killed amid Russia tensions

AFP, Kiev

Ukraine yesterday said that one of its soldiers was killed in fighting with pro-Russia separatists in the east of the country, as tensions with Moscow soar.

Kiev has been battling a pro-Moscow insurgency in two breakaway regions bordering Russia since 2014, when the Kremlin annexed Crimea.

Russia has massed troops near Ukraine's borders and the West has for weeks accused it of planning an invasion, warning Moscow of massive sanctions should it launch an attack. Russia denies the claim and asked Western countries for security guarantees.