

International

Trump signs vaccine decree after questions raised on ample supply

Decree aims at granting Americans priority access to vaccines

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump announced a decree Tuesday aimed at granting Americans priority access to vaccines, but faced questions over whether the White House missed an opportunity to shore up sufficient doses in the months ahead. While Trump sought to trumpet his administration's policies related to vaccines at his event, his upbeat message was contrasted by a more cautious presentation held simultaneously by President-elect Joe Biden.

Biden warned that efforts to get the vaccine out to Americans would "slow and stall" if Congress does not urgently come up with funding as he also introduced members of his health team.

It was unclear whether Trump's executive order, which he said would "ensure that American citizens have first priority to receive American vaccines," would hold legal weight, since drugmakers have already signed deals with other countries. But it signals the White House is concerned about whether it has sufficient doses to meet its immunization targets, which are 100 million people by the end of February and the whole country by June. Speaking from his headquarters in Wilmington, Delaware, Biden stressed it was imperative for lawmakers to "finish the bipartisan work underway now or millions of Americans may wait months longer to get the vaccine." Biden also pledged that his administration would carry out at least 100 million vaccinations in his first 100 days in office, a more conservative estimate than that offered by Trump officials.

Biden, who has previously announced that Anthony Fauci will be a member of his Covid team, said he would ask the globally-renowned infectious disease scientist to tell him "what I need to know, not what I want to know." Fauci also appeared remotely at Biden's event rather than at Trump's.

Trump's speech at a White House "vaccine summit" was also marked by his familiar, unproven claims that the 2020 election was stolen from him. Biden is due to be sworn in on January 20.

Positive news

The events follow a raft of positive news related to vaccines, including US regulators calling the Pfizer-BioNTech immunization—which Britain began rolling out on Tuesday—safe and effective in a briefing document. The document further raised expectations that Pfizer will soon be granted emergency approval in the United States, with a meeting on the topic set for Thursday.

A meeting on emergency approval for US firm



US President Donald Trump signs an executive order giving priority to Americans to receive American coronavirus vaccines during the Operation Warp Speed Vaccine Summit in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building adjacent to the White House in Washington, DC on December 8, 2020. US President Donald Trump on Tuesday signed an executive order "to ensure that American citizens have first priority to receive American vaccines." —AFP

Moderna's vaccine candidate is scheduled for December 17. As coronavirus cases soar across the United States and states reinstate varying levels of closures in response, the vaccines have provided hope to a country weary and grieving over the world's highest pandemic death toll.

On Monday, an overwhelming majority of California's residents went into lockdown, putting 33 million people under stay-at-home orders. In the meantime, complex preparations are being made across the supply chain to be able to quickly deliver vaccines at the frigid temperatures required.

But while Trump has sought to take credit for vaccine development, the New York Times reported Monday that the White House had missed a chance to lock in the purchase of more Pfizer doses over the summer. The US has purchased 100 million doses, but declined to extend that order, allowing Pfizer to seal deals with other nations, the Times reported.

Georgetown law professor Matthew Kavanagh told AFP the new presidential decree was an attempt to "write vaccine nationalism into law—which is both unwise and stretches his legal authority." It is neither ethical nor

good for Americans to suggest that every healthy young person in the US needs to be vaccinated before the first high-risk person in India or France or Colombia. "Models have shown that a strategy like this would actually make the pandemic longer, further derail the global economy, and harm Americans."

The president does have the authority to order international assistance efforts not to help less-wealthy countries get access to the vaccine, Kavanagh said.

More vaccines on horizon

The briefing document compiled by an advisory committee to the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) offers the clearest look yet at data on the Pfizer vaccine, and was hailed by experts. "It appears as good if not better than advertised," Andrew Morris, an infectious disease specialist at the University of Toronto told AFP. But there was some concern arising from four people in the vaccine group developing Bell's palsy, a rare but non-serious facial paralysis condition. Vaccine makers Johnson & Johnson and AstraZeneca could be next on the horizon as they are expected to complete their studies early next year. —AFP

Biden recruits raise questions

WASHINGTON: US President-elect Joe Biden didn't go far for his choice of defense secretary: former army general Lloyd Austin came from the same inside-the-Beltway consultants as Biden's secretary of state, intelligence chief and White House communications head.

Biden's recruitment of at least a half-dozen people from a single high-powered firm, WestExec Advisors, to run his foreign and security policies, has raised new questions about Washington's much-derided revolving door of influence peddlers.

Biden has tapped WestExec co-founder Antony Blinken to be his secretary of state; Avril Haines for director of national intelligence; Jen Psaki as communications chief; and others on his transition team. The president-elect made official on Tuesday his choice of retired four star general Austin, a partner in WestExec's investment unit, Pine Island Capital Partners.

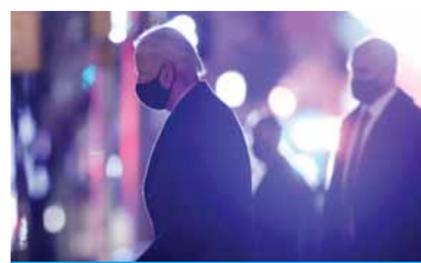
Blinken is also a Pine Island investor, as is the woman Austin beat out for the Pentagon job, WestExec co-founder Michele Flournoy. And according to reports, WestExec's David Cohen is the frontrunner to lead the Central Intelligence Agency.

After four years of President Donald Trump's administration being repeatedly accused of using government for personal profit, Biden's turn to a company with close defense industry ties has raised the same kinds of questions. "The onus is now on the Biden administration and these nominees to show that they will take careful steps to avoid conflicts of interest," said Noah Bookbinder, executive director of the public interest group Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington.

"I hope that the next administration learns the right lessons" from Trump's near-total disregard for conflict-of-interest standards, he said.

Road to the Situation Room

WestExec was created in 2017 as a home for top officials newly jobless after serving the 2009-2017 administration of Democratic president Barack Obama. It offered "strategic advisory" services to companies wanting to tap the former Obama people's experience at



WILMINGTON, Delaware: US President-elect Joe Biden leaves the Queen Theater after announcing the members of his health policy team. —AFP

the heart of military and national security policy.

The group named itself for the short road, West Executive Avenue, that passes between the White House and the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, where most White House staff work. West Executive Ave "is, quite literally, the road to the Situation Room, and it is the road everyone associated with WestExec Advisors has crossed many times en route to meetings of the highest national security consequence," their website reads. For many it sounds like the incestuous world of Washington lobbyists-Beltway insiders with lavish budgets to open doors to persuade officials and legislators to change rules or allocate funds for their clients.

Because of strict rules born of decades of corruption and influence peddling, lobbyists have to publicly reveal their clients. But so-called strategic consultants like WestExec do not have to, because at least officially they are supposed to keep a distance from officials and lawmakers. They provide clients the lay of the land, telling them how to navigate policies and officialdom without taking them through the process. WestExec, though, is believed to have had a host of wealthy clients in the defense and security sectors. The American Prospect and The New York Times have identified among its customers drone maker Shield AI, which has a Pentagon contract; Schmidt Futures, controlled by Google former CEO Eric Schmidt; and Israeli artificial intelligence firm Windward. Pine Island, meanwhile, raised \$283 million for investments, putting some of the money into defense manufacturers. —AFP



Alitalia is cooperating with Delta Air Lines to operate "COVID-free" flights between Rome and the US. —AFP

First 'COVID-tested' flight lands in Rome from New York

ROME: The first "COVID-tested" flight arrived in Rome from New York yesterday, an initiative designed to open up air routes between Europe and the United States blocked by the pandemic. Passengers had to show they had returned a negative virus test within 48 hours of getting on the Alitalia flight from John F. Kennedy airport, and were required to take another test on arrival at Rome's Fiumicino. All 100 passengers on board came up negative, according to the AGI news agency, allowing them to avoid a 14-day quarantine required of other arrivals from the United States. Among them was Chiara, an Italian living in the United States who is visiting her parents with her husband and seven-month-old son.

"It's been almost a year since we returned to Italy," she said. "In April our son was born and so far no one from our family has met him. That's why we are so thrilled." Everyone on board still had to wear masks and replace them every four hours, according to airport authorities. "This is an extraordinary experiment, because it rekindles hope for air travel, mobility and the economy even in the presence of coronavirus," said Nicola Zingaretti, head of the Lazio region that includes Rome. —AFP

Real estate agency asks Trump fans to buy him childhood home

NEW YORK: Donald Trump's childhood home in New York—already sold twice since 2016—is back on the market. But this time, the real estate agency is appealing directly to the president's fans to buy the house for the unprecedented price of \$3 million and offer it to Trump as a gift. Paramount Realty agency on Tuesday launched a fundraiser on the crowdfunding site GoFundMe, calling on Trump fans to contribute towards the goal of reaching \$3 million.

If the money is raised, the house will be given to the outgoing president. The agency had recently tried to sell the house, located in the affluent Jamaica Estates neighborhood in New York's Queens borough, for \$3 million at classic auctions, but without success.

But then they came up with the crowdfunding strategy, which has "never been done before," Paramount real estate agent Misha Haghani said. "It is more likely that one million people who love Trump would each give three dollars, rather than a wealthy buyer giving three

million," he said. Based on his real estate criteria, the mock Tudor five bedroom, four bathroom house—where Trump lived until age four, when he moved to a more affluent home nearby—is barely worth more than \$1 million. But its "intangible value" makes it "unique," Haghani



The house in Jamaica Estates, an affluent area of New York

said. The house was sold for \$2.14 million in March 2017, shortly after Trump took office. And now that the former real estate mogul is about to leave the White House in January, buying the house is "almost like a thank you or a going away present for those who do love him," Haghani explained.

The goal is to capitalize on the fervor sparked by the "polarizing" leader, he said. Trump, who changed his state of residence to Florida from New York in October 2019, was not consulted for the house project, Haghani added. Even if he no longer wants the house—though he said he would like to buy it when it went on sale in 2016—his fans wouldn't have invested for nothing: the GoFundMe page states the house would then go to a charity chosen by Trump. And if he doesn't choose a charity, "we will make a selection for him," Haghani said.

Will Trump fans take the bait? Just after the GoFundMe went live Tuesday, the fundraiser had received a single donation of \$45. —AFP

News in brief

Israel takes delivery of COVID vaccine

TEL AVIV: Israel received its first batch of Pfizer's coronavirus vaccine yesterday, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declaring the pandemic's end was "in sight" and vowing to get the first jab. "This is a great celebration for Israel," he said on the tarmac at Ben Gurion airport, near Tel Aviv, as a forklift truck started unloading the cargo from a red and yellow DHL air freighter. The shipment was the first of eight million doses ordered from US pharmaceutical giant Pfizer BioNTech. It came ahead of Hanukkah, the Jewish Festival of Lights, which begins today. —AFP

France probes rescue helicopter crash

ALBERTVILLE, France: French investigators were yesterday seeking to ascertain the cause of the crash of a mountain rescue helicopter in the Alps that left five dead with only the pilot surviving but badly wounded. The helicopter, an Airbus EC135 operated by a private firm, crashed Tuesday evening around the town of Bonvillard just outside Albertville, one of the main resorts in the French Alps. The prefect, the top local official, for the Savoy region Pascal Bolot said of the five passengers and pilot on board only the pilot had survived but was badly wounded. Despite difficult weather conditions with fog at the crash site 1,800 meters (6,000 feet) above sea level, he was evacuated to hospital. Bolot said it was the pilot himself who had raised the alarm. —AFP

Mexico to limit actions of US agents

MEXICO CITY: Mexico plans to restrict the activities of foreign agencies like the US Drug Enforcement Administration, President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador said Tuesday, following a row over the arrest of a former defense minister. The proposed new regulations are contained in a bill that the government has presented to the Senate to reform the national security law. Although Lopez Obrador did not give details of the proposed changes, press leaks suggest that foreign agents would have to share all the information they gather in Mexico and could lose their diplomatic immunity in certain circumstances. "We want to resolve this once and for all so that the rules are clear," Lopez Obrador told reporters. —AFP

Maduro eyes of dialogue with Biden

CARACAS: Venezuela President Nicolas Maduro said Tuesday he hopes to open channels of communication and dialogue with the incoming administration of US President-Elect Joe Biden, after years of tension with the Trump White House. "We have always been willing and will always be willing to establish relations with communication, dialogue and respect with the government of the United States," Maduro told a press conference in Caracas. "Let's hope that the new government of Mr Joe Biden is installed, let's hope that they have time to think and let's hope that channels of communication and dialogue between Venezuela and the United States are opened." —AFP



Hacker fighter FireEye says breached by elite attackers

SAN FRANCISCO: Hacker fighting firm FireEye on Tuesday said its own defenses were breached by sophisticated attackers who stole "Red Team" tools used to test customers' computer systems.

While the hackers had yet to be identified, their tactics and targets led FireEye to believe it was a state-sponsored attack "by a nation with top-tier offensive capabilities." "The hack of a premier cybersecurity firm demonstrates that even the most sophisticated companies are vulnerable to cyber-attacks," said US Senator Mark Warner, a Democrat who is vice chairman of the senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

"We have come to expect and demand that companies take real steps to secure their systems, but this case also shows the difficulty of stopping determined nation-state hackers."

It did not appear any customer data was stolen from FireEye, or that the taken tools have been used in other attacks, according to the Silicon Valley-based firm. "The attackers tailored their world-class capabilities specifically to target and attack FireEye," FireEye chief executive Kevin Mandia said in a blog post revealing the breach. "They used a novel combination of techniques not witnessed by us or our partners in the past." FireEye shares were down more than 7 percent in after-market trades that followed released news about the hack. —AFP