

International

Deadly pandemic surges in US; regulators meet on vaccine

US records worst-ever daily COVID death tolls

WASHINGTON: American regulators met yesterday to assess the Pfizer coronavirus vaccine for emergency approval, as the country logged one of its worst-ever daily COVID-19 death tolls with more than 3,000 people lost to the pandemic. Other northern hemisphere countries were also grappling with a winter virus surge, as the number of global infections raced towards 70 million with more than 1.5 million deaths.

It is not confirmed when the US Food and Drug Administration will issue the emergency authorization for the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, but Health Secretary Alex Azar indicated that officials have early next week in mind. "Now we actually get to do something that hopefully will bring this... pandemic to an end," said Terri White, a nursing education specialist at UW Health in the state of Wisconsin, where staff are being trained to administer the vaccine.

"I know our whole team is really excited about that prospect... to help our lives return to normal." Top US government scientists said, however, that people with a known history of severe allergic reactions would be asked not to take the Pfizer vaccine, following a similar warning in Britain. The United States is the worst-hit nation in the world, with more than 15 million known infections and close to 290,000 deaths.

US Army General Gus Perna, who is oversee-

ing logistics nationwide, said he had given the order Wednesday to begin distributing syringes, needles, alcohol wipes and diluents required for the Pfizer vaccine, a process expected to be completed by Friday. The next vaccines to receive approval might be those made by Moderna, Johnson & Johnson, and AstraZeneca, most likely in that order. The US hopes to vaccinate 20 million people this month, with long term care facility residents and health care workers at the front of the line. The goal is to reach 100 million by the end of February and the whole population by June.

'I'm really excited'

After Britain gave the first approved vaccine shots in the Western world, Canada also approved the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine on Wednesday. The first shipments to 14 sites across Canada are scheduled to arrive Monday with people receiving shots a day or two later, according to Major-General Dany Fortin, the commander put in charge of coordinating distribution. Healthcare workers and vulnerable populations including the elderly are to be the first to receive it.

"I'm really excited. I want to get vaccinated as soon as possible, because I have a new baby," Michelle, a Toronto resident said. "She's under six



LONDON: Lorna Lucas, 81, receives the first of two Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccines shortly before her husband, Winston at Guy's Hospital, in central London. — AFP

months old, and so obviously my main concern through the whole pandemic has been to protect her." Israel accepted its first shipment of the Pfizer vaccine on Wednesday, targeting a rollout on December 27, with Prime Minister Benjamin

Netanyahu promising to be the first to be injected - although the vaccine has yet to pass regulatory hurdles there. Both Russia and China have already begun inoculation campaigns with domestically produced vaccines. — AFP

Pfizer and BioNTech vaccine documents accessed in EU hack

WASHINGTON: Documents relating to the regulatory submission for Pfizer and BioNTech's COVID-19 vaccine candidate were "unlawfully accessed" during a cyberattack on the European Medicines Agency (EMA), Pfizer said Wednesday. "It is important to note that no BioNTech or Pfizer systems have been breached in connection with this incident and we are unaware of any personal data being accessed," a statement said. "We await further information about EMA's investigation and will respond appropriately and in accordance with EU law.

"Given the critical public health considerations and the importance of transparency, we continue to provide clarity around all aspects of the vaccine development and regulatory processes." The Amsterdam-based EMA has said the incident was being investigated, but did not specify when it took place or whether its work on Covid-19 was targeted. The Dutch national police high-tech crime team was involved in the probe into the cyberattack, but police gave no more information, the Dutch news agency ANP reported.

The EMA's role as the drugs regulator for the 27-nation EU means it has access to data on the safety and quality of medicines from clinical trials and lab tests from companies that apply for authorization. The agency has said it will give a decision on conditional approval for Pfizer-BioNTech's Covid-19 vaccine at a meeting that will be held by December 29 at the latest, while a ruling on Moderna's version should follow by January 12. The

Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, BNT162b2, has received emergency approval in Great Britain and Canada.

Canada approves vaccine

Meanwhile, Canada has approved the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine, days after Britain became the first country to greenlight and roll it out. "At last we have a reason to feel optimistic and excited about returning to the lives we led pre-COVID," Canadian deputy chief public health officer Howard Njoo told a news conference, adding that Ottawa was "bringing vaccines to Canadians earlier than hoped." Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in a tweet called the announcement good news, but warned: "It doesn't mean we can let our guards down" against the spread of the COVID-19 illness as a second wave forced several regions to reintroduce restrictions.

The government's chief medical advisor Supriya Sharma said the authorization of the Pfizer-BioNTech shot "marks a critical milestone in our efforts to bring Covid-19 under control." She said additional vaccines would become available and be rolled out throughout 2021, with three other vaccine candidates-including one developed by US-based Moderna, which could be delivered later this month-currently being evaluated by health authorities. These, she said, will provide "every Canadian with the opportunity to be immunized."

The Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine had undergone a fast-tracked review while it was still in clinical trials, which concluded that it met "stringent safety, efficacy and quality requirements for use in Canada," said the country's health department, Health Canada. The Gulf kingdom of Bahrain has also approved the vaccine. Marc Berthiaume, director of Health Canada's bureau of medical science, said its evaluation found "strong evidence that the benefits of the vaccine outweigh the risks." The regulator advised, however, that it should be used only in people 16 years of age and up, for now.— Agencies

Inmates mysteriously escape S African jail

JOHANNESBURG: South African police were on Wednesday hunting for two prisoners who inexplicably escaped in the early hours from a high-security facility in the capital Pretoria, a correctional services spokesman said. The two on the run escaped before dawn from Kgosi Mampuru II Correctional Centre prison, where the likes of paralympic athlete Oscar Pistorius and apartheid death-squad leader Eugene de Kock, nicknamed "Prime Evil" have been held. Local media reported that the inmates had escaped by digging a hole in the wall of their cell.

In a statement correctional services spokesman Singabakho Nxumalo identified the pair as Thabo Zacharia Muyambo from Mozambique, who is serving a life sentence for 21 counts of various crimes including rape and kidnapping, alongside Zimbabwean national Johannes Chauke who is serving 20 years for housebreaking offences. The spokesman declined to comment on the details of the escape from the high-wall facility which has layers of cell bars and boom gates.

But he confirmed to AFP that a hammer had been found inside the cell and a small hole was discovered high up on the wall of the cell. The Sowetan newspaper said inmates had confirmed to the publication that the escapees used a sharp object, believed to have been stolen from the prison's workshop, to dig a hole through the wall of their cell. Images carried by the publication show a visible hole dug out of a wall said to be that which the inmates used to make their getaway. — AFP