



Bangladesh in crisis; South Asia battles monsoon rains

Hundreds of bodies recovered from Bolivian streets, homes

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BANDA ACEH: Gravediggers wearing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) carry the coffin of a COVID-19 coronavirus victim during a burial at a cemetery in Banda Aceh. —AFP

Cybercriminals target COVID research

Two Chinese indicted; hundreds of companies hacked

WASHINGTON: Two Chinese nationals have been indicted for seeking to steal COVID-19 vaccine research and hacking hundreds of companies in the United States and abroad, including defense contractors, the US Justice Department said Tuesday. Li Xiaoyu, 34, and Dong Jiazhi, 33, also targeted human rights activists in the United States, China and Hong Kong, Assistant Attorney General John Demers said.

The indictment comes amid rising tensions between the global superpowers fueled by the coronavirus pandemic which President Donald Trump blames on China. Li and Dong, who are believed to be in China, acted in some instances "for their own personal gain" and in others for the benefit of China's Ministry of State Security, Demers said at a news conference. "China has now taken its place, alongside Russia, Iran, and North Korea, in that shameful club of nations that provide a safe haven for cyber criminals," Demers said.

The Justice Department said Li and Dong, who were classmates at an electrical engineering college in Chengdu, have been engaged in a computer hacking campaign for the past 10 years. They have targeted companies in the United States, Australia, Belgium, Germany, Japan, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Spain, South Korea, Sweden, and

Britain, it said. "Targeted industries included, among others, high tech manufacturing; medical device, civil, and industrial engineering; business, educational, and gaming software; solar energy; pharmaceuticals; defense," it said.

"More recently, the defendants probed for vulnerabilities in computer networks of companies developing COVID-19 vaccines, testing technology, and treatments," it said. Justice Department officials said that Li and Dong targeted biotech companies in California, Maryland, Massachusetts and elsewhere but did not appear to have actually compromised any COVID-19 research.

Dissidents targeted

The Justice Department said they also targeted "non-governmental organizations, and individual dissidents, clergy, and democratic and human rights activists in the United States and abroad, including

Hong Kong and China." According to the indictment, Li and Dong supplied the Ministry of State Security with passwords for personal email accounts belonging to Chinese dissidents, a Hong Kong community organizer, the pastor of a Christian church in Xian and a former Tiananmen Square protestor.

Among the material allegedly stolen were emails between a dissident and the Dalai Lama's office. The pair were accused of stealing source code from software companies, information about drugs under development from pharmaceutical firms and weapons designs and testing data from defense contractors.

Targeted foreign companies were not identified by name. But according to the indictment they included a Dutch electronics firm, a Swedish gaming company, a Lithuanian gaming company, a German software engineering firm, a Belgian engineering software company, an Australian defense contractor, a South Korean shipbuilding firm, a Spanish elec-

tronics and defense firm and a British artificial intelligence and cancer research company.

Li and Dong allegedly stole information from defense contractors regarding military satellite programs, military wireless networks and communications systems and microwave and laser systems. The indictment was returned by a grand jury in the Eastern District of Washington state on July 7 but was only unsealed on Tuesday. Li and Dong were charged with conspiracy to commit computer fraud, conspiracy to commit theft of trade secrets, wire fraud, unauthorized access of a computer and identity theft.

China accused the United States last month of smearing Beijing following allegations that Chinese hackers were attempting to steal coronavirus research. The claims exacerbated tensions between the two countries, which have traded barbs over the origin of the pandemic that has killed more than 600,000 people since it emerged in China late last year. "China expresses strong dissatisfaction and firm opposition to such smearing," foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said. "Judging from past records, the US has carried out the largest cybertheft operations worldwide," Zhao said. — AFP



Pandemic fuels rising tensions

Chinese COVID-19 vaccine starts final tests in Brazil

BRASILIA: A Chinese-made vaccine against the new coronavirus entered the final stage of testing Tuesday in Brazil, where volunteers received the first doses of what officials hope will be a game-changer in the global pandemic. The vaccine, developed by private Chinese pharmaceutical firm Sinovac Biotech, became the third in the world to enter Phase 3 clinical trials, or large-scale testing on humans—the last step before regulatory approval.

"We're living in unique and historic times, and that's why I wanted to be part of this trial," said the 27-year-old doctor who received the first dose at the Clinical Hospital of Sao Paulo. Her name was withheld for confidentiality. Around 9,000 health workers across six Brazilian states will receive the vaccine, known as CoronaVac, in two doses over the next three months under the study. Sao Paulo Governor Joao Doria said Monday initial results were expected within 90 days. Sinovac is partnering with a Brazilian public health research center, the Butantan Institute, on the trials.

If the vaccine proves safe and effective, the institute will have the right to produce 120 million doses under the deal, according to officials. Brazil is the second-hardest-hit country in the coronavirus pandemic, after the United States. Its death toll surpassed 80,000 Monday, and it has registered 2.1 million infections. Because the virus is still spreading quickly in the South American country, it is seen as



SAO PAULO: A volunteer receives the COVID-19 vaccine during the trial stage of the vaccine produced by the Chinese company Sinovac Biotech at the Hospital das Clinicas (HC) in Sao Paulo state, Brazil. —AFP

an ideal testing ground for vaccine candidates.

Brazil is also helping carry out Phase 3 testing of another experimental vaccine, developed by Oxford University and pharmaceutical firm AstraZeneca. It has a similar deal to produce that vaccine domestically if it is successful in tests, which are also being carried out in Britain and South Africa. Brazilian health regulators announced Monday they have also authorized Phase 1, 2 and 3 trials of two more vaccines, developed by US firm Pfizer and Germany's BioNTech.

Researchers worldwide are racing to develop and test a vaccine for the virus. There are more than 150 projects so far. Studies published Monday in British medical journal The Lancet found two vaccine candidates were safe and produced an immune response in Phase 2 trials: the Oxford vaccine and another Chinese-made vaccine, developed by pharmaceutical firm CanSino Biologics and the Beijing Institute of Biotechnology. — AFP

Madagascar hospitals 'overwhelmed' by coronavirus surge

ANTANANARIVO: Hospital officials in Madagascar's capital Antananarivo say they are struggling to cope with a rush of coronavirus patients despite the distribution of a herbal drink touted as a remedy by the president. President Andry Rajoelina has been promoting an infusion derived from artemisia—a plant with proven anti-malarial properties—as a homegrown cure for COVID-19. He has brushed off warnings by the World Health Organization (WHO) that there are no published scientific studies of the drink—which has been called Covid-Organics—and that its effects have not been tested.

But COVID-designated hospitals in Antananarivo warn they are starting to run out of beds. "We are now only accepting severe cases," Andohotapenaka Hospital director Nasolotsiry Raveloson told AFP on Tuesday. "The number of cases is increasing more and more," he explained. "We now have 46 severe cases and so we only have four spaces left." At Joseph Raseta Befelatanana Hospital, director Many Randria said the facility was "overwhelmed".

"It is impossible to free up spaces for the moment," he said. The head of Anosiata University Hospital, Rado Razafimahatratra echoed the concerns, noting that the facility was "constantly overwhelmed". To date the Indian Ocean island-nation of Madagascar has recorded 7,548 coronavirus

cases, including just 65 deaths. Infections have spiked over recent days, however, raising concern in a country where three-quarters of the population live on less than \$1.90 per day, according to the World Bank.

'Notable flare-ups'

In a letter on Monday, the health ministry made an "urgent appeal" to development agencies to support its "fight" against coronavirus. "Over the past weeks, the COVID-19 epidemic has evolved in a very critical way in Madagascar with notable flare-ups in certain regions, particularly in Antananarivo," said the letter. The ministry asked for oxygen bottles, 227 ventilators, 2.3 million face masks, 697,000 pairs of gloves and 533,200 medical blouses.

Government spokeswoman Lalatiana Rakotondrzafy said the state was aware it faced "certain shortages" but was working hard to "find solutions"—citing new treatment centers in the capital and eastern city of Toamasina. "Two factors have contributed to the spread of this disease," said health department official Zely Arivelo Andriamanantany on local television. "Firstly... people took CVO (Covid-Organics) and then didn't respect social distancing. Secondly, CVO only guarantees protection for two to three weeks," he said.

The government, meanwhile, has blamed the rise in cases on "increased testing capacity". "Positive COVID-19 cases did not take CVO or only took it sporadically, without following the prescribed dosage," said official documents sent to AFP on Tuesday. "Almost systematically, within the same family unit, those who result positive were not drinking CVO—or at least not regularly—while those who tested negative were taking the solution (and) remained negative despite living together without necessarily social distancing." — AFP