

## International

# World scrambles for vaccine deals as COVID infections near 60 million

## US leads the world in COVID deaths and infections

PARIS/BERLIN: Countries around the world are scrambling to finalize vaccine deals as the global number of coronavirus infections approached 60 million yesterday, scientists urged caution and US officials pleaded with Americans to stay home over Thanksgiving. The holiday weekend is expected to fuel a surge of infections in the United States, which leads the world with soaring COVID-19 infections and the daily toll on Tuesday climbing above 2,000, the highest 24-hour tally since early May.

Hopes for a successful vaccine, boosted by Pfizer, AstraZenica and Moderna, have boosted world stock markets. But an approved vaccine is unlikely to be widely available for months while scientists insist on the continued need for vigilance as politicians seek to relax curbs for Christmas amid a second wave of the pandemic.

Germany yesterday reported a record 410 COVID-19 deaths in the last 24 hours, before its 16 federal state leaders and Chancellor Angela Merkel meet today to discuss easing restrictions for the Christmas and New Year holidays. Italy reported 853 deaths related to COVID-19 on Tuesday, soar-

ing from 630 the day before and the highest daily toll since March 28. But new infections and the number of people in hospital with the virus in France dropped sharply as a national lockdown went into its fourth week.

French President Emmanuel Macron said on Tuesday a vaccine could start being administered by the end of the year. "We will very likely, and pending authorization by health authorities, start vaccination of the most vulnerable populations, hence the elderly, as soon as the end of December, early January," he said in a televised address.

Air France-KLM is among airlines gearing up for the challenge of transporting millions of doses of temperature-sensitive COVID-19 vaccines. "It's going to be a major logistics challenge," said Air France cargo chief Christophe Boucher. Macron said France will start easing its COVID-19 lockdown this weekend so that by Christmas, shops, theatres and cinemas will reopen and people can spend the holiday with their families.

### Thanksgiving challenges

The four nations of the United Kingdom, which



LONDON: People wearing a face mask because of the coronavirus pandemic walk in London's China Town yesterday. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said the "escape route" from the coronavirus was in sight as he announced that tough restrictions in England would not be extended beyond December 2. — AFP

have devised their own pandemic policies until now, agreed to relax restrictions for Christmas to allow up to three households to meet at home for five days. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen warned against relaxing lockdowns too quickly.

"We must learn from the summer and not repeat the same mistakes," she told the European

Parliament. "Relaxing too fast and too much is a risk for a third wave after Christmas."

US President-elect Joe Biden was to give a speech later highlighting the challenges facing Americans as Thanksgiving approaches, challenges incumbent President Donald Trump has repeatedly failed to address over the last year and into the final days of his tenure. — Reuters



## Germany, France plan to relax curbs over Christmas

## What is it like to take part in a vaccine trial?

MIAMI: A key facet of the global mad scramble by Pfizer, Moderna and other pharma groups to develop a viable coronavirus vaccine is the recruitment of tens of thousands of volunteers willing to participate in clinical trials. AFP's correspondent in Miami, Leila Macor, took part in such a trial organized by US biotech firm Moderna, which announced Monday that its experimental vaccine was nearly 95 percent effective.

Why did Macor, who suffers from asthma, decide to be one of Moderna's 30,000 test subjects? Here, she recounts her experience, which began just weeks after her own father died of COVID-19 in Chile.

### Tough decision

Three weeks before Pfizer and Moderna launched their coronavirus vaccine clinical trials in late July, my father passed away-alone, as so many have in this crisis. As our family lived through the trauma, and said goodbye as best we could, I was confronting another stark and dangerous reality-Miami was becoming a major US virus hotspot, and my job was to cover the story.

But my life has been irrevocably changed. I lost my dad, and I have asthma, which could lead to serious complications if I were to be infected. The idea of taking action to help bring this deadly medical



In this file photo taken on September 10, 2020 a nurse prepares to inoculate volunteer Ilya Dubrovin, 36, with Russia's new coronavirus vaccine in a post-registration trials at a clinic in Moscow. — AFP

emergency under control offered me some inner peace.

Let me be clear, this was a totally personal decision that had nothing to do with work.

I talked it over with friends and family, who helped me decide that any possible side effects from the trial would not be worse than getting COVID-19. So I took the plunge. Two days after writing a story about the start of phase 3 trials in Florida, I once again knocked on the door of a lab-this time as a potential subject.

Research Centers of America, located in the Miami suburb of Hollywood, was working on trials for Pfizer and Moderna, alternating every other day.

Dozens of other labs were recruiting volunteers across the United States. Anyone was eligible, as long as they were in high-risk jobs: doctors, taxi drivers,

grocery store workers... and reporters.

I made an appointment for a Tuesday in mid-August. That happened to be a Moderna day.

### Vaccine or placebo?

Lab staff put a name tag on me and brought me to an office, where they explained what would happen. They also gave me a 22-page document with all the details. The trial consists of two doses. Volunteers are paid \$2,400 over the course of the two-year study. They warned of possible side effects-from pain at the injection site to fever and chills. The 30,000 subjects are divided in two groups: those who get the vaccine and those who get a placebo.

"Even we don't know which is which," the nurse told me, when I asked about my group. Only Moderna knows-but not until the data is compiled and analyzed. — AFP

## Sudanese open arms to fleeing Ethiopians

HAMDAYIT, Sudan: Ethiopian refugee Sejamara didn't know what to expect when she and her husband waded across a river to Sudan, certainly not the welcome they received from local residents.

Hungry, thirsty and exhausted after a trek of several hours, they entered the poor border town of Hamdayit in the early days of the conflict in northern Ethiopia's Tigray region. All they wanted was a place to sleep, away from the crammed makeshift camps housing thousands of refugees at the nearby Hamdayit transit centre.

"We thought of renting a place but the people here have put us up without money," said Sejamara, who now lives in a straw-built shelter with a simple bed inside. The young couple are among more than 40,000 Ethiopians turned into refugees inside Sudan since the Tigray conflict erupted in early November. Hundreds have been killed in fighting between the federal government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and the Tigray People's Liberation Front.

"They can stay here as long as

they want," said Sejamara's hostess Mariam Abubakr, who lives nearby in a small mud house with a thatched roof.

Like thousands of others, Sejamara and her husband have registered with aid groups to receive daily meals at the transit center. "We'll stay here for a few days, until things calm down... If not, we'll have no option but to live in a refugee camp," she said.

The border region of eastern Sudan has a long history of hospitality in times of hardship. Since 1967, it has hosted hundreds of thousands of Ethiopian and Eritrean war or famine refugees.

### Crowded camps

Many residents of Hamdayit, itself a poverty-stricken region, have again welcomed Ethiopian refugees in their modest homes. Some offer shelter only, others are providing food and water.

Hamdayit's transit center says it has taken in 24,000 refugees. "It's become very crowded around here but that's alright. They're our guests," said local farmer Eissa Hassan.

However, the influx has resulted in instant price hikes. "Prices of vegetables, fruit, meat, and even water have increased dramatically," said Hassan, with the price of bananas doubling for instance. Farmer and trader Bahradin Yacoub explained: "Now that demand is higher, prices have increased." — AFP



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## German vote to pick Merkel successor set for Sept 26, 2021

BERLIN: The German government yesterday agreed on September 26 next year for the general election to choose a successor to Chancellor Angela Merkel, a government spokeswoman said.

Merkel has said she will not stand for a fifth term and will retire from politics next year after 16 years at the helm of Europe's top economic power and the EU's most populous country. Her departure will mark a new, less certain phase in German politics and at the heart of the European Union, whose rotating presidency Merkel currently holds.

The government "proposes to the federal president the date of Sunday, September 26, 2021 for the election of the 20th Bundestag (lower house of parliament)," spokeswoman Martina Fietz told reporters. President Frank-Walter Steinmeier must still give his official approval. The race to fill Merkel's shoes still looks wide open, as her Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party remains embroiled in an increasingly bitter leadership battle that has been extended by the pandemic. There are currently three hopefuls for the top job in Germany's biggest party, with a twice-delayed election for a new chief now scheduled for mid-January.

North Rhine-Westphalia state premier Armin Laschet, corporate lawyer Friedrich Merz and foreign affairs expert Norbert Rottgen are vying for the post. The candidates have proposed an online congress if



BERLIN: German Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer (right) speaks and gesticulates during a session of questions at the Bundestag (lower house of parliament) in Berlin yesterday. — AFP

meeting in person were to be impossible because of restrictions to curb coronavirus transmission.

### Pandemic uncertainty

The chief of the CDU traditionally leads it and its smaller Bavarian sister party the Christian Social Union to the polls. However given the failure of any of the Christian Democrat candidates to create real momentum at this early stage, CSU chief and Bavarian premier Markus Soeder has been the focus of ardent speculation about a possible run.

Bavaria has been among the states hardest hit by coronavirus infections and Soeder's robust response to the outbreak has won praise and given him an intense national spotlight. He leads opinion polls against all three CDU candidates when Germans are asked who they would like to see as their next chancellor. Yet Germany's complex coalition maths, the uncertainty created by the pandemic and the absence of Merkel as a foregone conclusion in a German general election could well throw up other surprises. — AFP

## 8 dead as migrant boat capsizes off Canaries

ARGUINEGUIN, Spain: Eight people died when a rickety boat carrying migrants capsized off Lanzarote in the Canary Islands, the emergency services on this Spanish archipelago said yesterday. Rescuers had initially given a toll of four dead after the boat went down just off Orzola, a village at the northern tip of Lanzarote island, at around 7:30 pm (1830 GMT) on Tuesday evening.

But they later found another four bodies, the 12 emergency services said yesterday morning. Enrique Espinosa, Lanzarote's emergency chief, said 28 people survived, telling the authorities the boat had set sail three days earlier from the Moroccan port of Agadir which lies some 420 kilometers (260 miles) away. More than 18,000 people have landed on the Spanish archipelago since the start of 2020, some two-thirds of them in the past few months, after making the perilous trip by boat from the African coast.

Spain is in the process of setting up emergency camps for up to 7,000 people as it seeks to tackle the huge influx of arrivals in the Canary Islands, while also stepping up a diplomatic offensive in various African countries to slow the rate of departures. The current wave has echoes of the crisis of 2006 when 30,000 migrants reached the Canaries, prompting Spain to step up patrols and ink repatriation agreements. — AFP

## Car crashes into gate of Merkel's office in Berlin

BERLIN: A car with slogans scrawled on its sides crashed into the gate of the office of German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Berlin yesterday and police arrested the driver, a Reuters witness said.

Reuters pictures from the scene showed police inspecting the estate car at the gate with the words "Stop Globalization Politics" written in white on its right side and "You damn killers of children and old people" on the other.

"The Chancellor, other members of the government and people working in the Chancellery were not in danger at any time," government spokesman Steffen Seibert said, adding that the incident had caused only minor damage. It was not clear if Merkel was inside the building, a white post-mod-

ernist structure set across a square from the Reichstag building that houses Germany's parliament and well set back from any main roads. Dozens of police and a fire engine attended the incident.

The driver, who appeared to be in late middle age, was taken away in a wheelchair by police.

"We are establishing if the driver deliberately drove against (the gate)," Berlin police said on Twitter. "He has been taken into custody." A firefighter subsequently moved the car, which had a license plate from the north-western county of Lippe, away from the gate. Both fence and car appeared largely undamaged.

Berlin is home to an active left-wing anti-globalization scene, whose members have sought to stop development projects by big global companies and occupied empty houses. Merkel was scheduled host a video conference of German state premiers yesterday, at which an extension to the coronavirus lockdown and further steps to combat the pandemic were due to be discussed. — Reuters