



Thousands of Eritrean refugees caught in crossfire of Tigray war

Suu Kyi's fate and Myanmar's, in the balance after army coup

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LONDON: Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson (left) walks past members of the public waiting to receive their vaccine as he visits a coronavirus COVID-19 vaccination center, the Al-Hikmah Vaccination Centre in Batley, northern England yesterday. —AFP

EU secures extra COVID-19 vaccines

Republicans to meet Biden over virus relief plan

BRUSSELS: European Union's efforts to secure COVID-19 vaccines received a much-needed boost after AstraZeneca promised to increase deliveries, while US Republicans were set to meet President Joe Biden to try and build bipartisan support for a huge national relief plan. BioNTech and Pfizer said yesterday they will ramp up their coronavirus vaccine deliveries to the European Union, pledging to send up to 75 million extra doses to the bloc in the spring.

"Pfizer and BioNTech continue to work toward increased deliveries beginning the week of February 15, ensuring we will supply the full quantity of vaccine doses in the first quarter of the year, as we are contractually committed to and up to an additional 75 million doses to the European Union in the second quarter," they said in a statement. The EU has ordered a total of 600 million doses of their Comirnaty vaccine.

The statement came hours ahead of a national conference called by Chancellor Angela Merkel with vaccine manufacturers amid growing anger over the bloc's sluggish inoculation campaign.

BioNTech and Pfizer, which will take part in the meeting, said that improvements in their production capabilities would allow them to speed up supplies. British-Swedish firm AstraZeneca will increase shipments of its vaccine to the EU by 30 percent, said European

Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen Sunday, as the bloc struggles to get its mass inoculation program up and running. AstraZeneca had had previously said it could deliver only a quarter of the doses originally promised to Brussels for the first quarter of the year, sparking outrage and accusations it was giving preferential treatment to Britain.

In the US, ten Republican senators were set to meet Biden to present an alternative to his \$1.3 trillion relief plan, arguing that a scaled-down approach could garner the bipartisan support he has said he seeks. Senator Susan Collins, a moderate Republican from Maine, said that she had joined the group to present their own \$600 billion package to help steer the world's worst-hit country out of historic health and economic crises.

The virus is known to have infected more than 102 million people so far—over 2.2 million deaths—and countries are scrambling to vaccinate their populations and lift economy-crippling restrictions. Kazakhstan began its campaign yesterday, with top health officials receiving Russia's Sputnik V vaccine in front of reporters. Deputy health minister Erlan Kiyasov said he didn't "feel any sort of discomfort" after receiving a shot. Also getting vaccinated in front of the cameras was the leader of the Maldives, as the tropical archipelago began its own

rollout using doses donated from India. South Africa, meanwhile, was poised to take possession of a first shipment of 20 million AstraZeneca/Oxford doses.

Africa has fallen behind in the global vaccine scramble as wealthier nations have been accused of bulk-buying doses directly from manufacturers.

UK hero hospitalized

Volunteers lined up in a London skyscraper, waiting to be taught how to administer the vaccine after the government called for 30,000 individuals to help administer the Pfizer-BioNTech and AstraZeneca doses. "When I had the opportunity to do something that made a difference, I definitely wanted to jump at it," documentary director Mike Day told AFP at Canary Wharf in east London. More than 8.9 million people have already received a first dose of the vaccine in the United Kingdom, the first Western country to launch a massive vaccination campaign in early December.

However, Britain is one of the hardest hit by the pandemic, and on Sunday the family of Captain Tom Moore—a 100-year-old former soldier who won hearts with a Covid-19 fundraising drive—was hospitalized with the virus. Countries elsewhere in Europe were tightening restrictions as caseloads keep climbing. A

two-week ban on foreign travel took effect in Portugal on Sunday as the country grapples a surge in cases, further devastating the already-battered tourism industry.

European budget carrier Ryanair also announced a 306-million-euro (\$371 million) third-quarter net loss on virus fallout yesterday, and forecast an annual loss of between 850 and 950 million euros.

In India, students in the southern tech hub of Hyderabad trooped into class for the first time in 10 months, with temperature tests in the playground before taking their seats in a classroom with "Welcome Back" chalked on the blackboard. Top indie film festival Sundance got underway online Sunday, with all 72 feature films making their premiere via streaming—a world away from the usual whirl of flashy, red-carpet screenings and after-parties high in the Utah mountains.

"Why make this movie?" said "House of Cards" star Robin Wright said ahead of the screening of her directorial debut "Land", a tale of solitude and isolation.

"It's a reminder that we do need each other." "We do face adversity, and it's generally the compassion and kindness of another person that gets us through that difficult time... I think we all can resonate with that right now." —AFP

Footage shows US cops pepper-sprayed 9-year-old girl

NEW YORK: A nine-year-old Black girl was handcuffed and pepper-sprayed by police in the US city of Rochester, footage released Sunday showed, sparking new outrage over excesses committed by the country's law enforcement. Deputy Police Chief Andre Anderson said Sunday the girl—who has not been named—had been suffering from a serious mental health emergency, reportedly threatening to take her own life and that of her mother.

Officers called to the scene on Friday responded by handcuffing her, before trying to force her into a car and pepper-spraying her when she resisted, body cam videos released by the city's police force showed. Footage of police violence against African-Americans, including the May killing of George Floyd, sparked a summer of protests across the US against racial injustice and police brutality last year.

Rochester police on Saturday claimed they were "required" to use handcuffs and the irritant against the girl for her own safety. Mayor Lovely Warren condemned their use of force against a child, pledging an internal review of the city's law enforcement practices. "It is clear from the video that we need to do more supporting our children and families," she said at a press conference Sunday. "I have a 10-year-old child, so she's a child, she's a baby," she added. "This video, as a mother, is not anything you want to see. We have to understand compassion, empathy." The incident is the second time in a year that Rochester has come under national scrutiny for police violence against African-Americans, following the killing last March of Daniel Prude, who died after police hooded and forced him face down on the road.

The death of Prude, who was also undergoing a mental health crisis at the time of his detention, prompted a grand jury probe and sparked mass protests. Rochester city council members condemned the footage, accusing the police of excessive force in a situation where mental health professionals should have been involved. Local police chief Cynthia Herriott-Sullivan also acknowledged that the police had acted excessively. "I'm not going to stand here and tell you that for a 9-year-old to have to be pepper-sprayed is OK," she said Sunday. "It's not." But the local police union president defended the officers' actions, saying that "limited resources" had left them no choice but to use pepper-spray against the child. "This is not about lack of compassion or empathy," Mike Mazzeo said Sunday. "We're dealing with a very difficult situation." "It's not TV, it's not Hollywood. We don't just have a simple put someone in handcuffs and have them comply," he said. —AFP

Major snow storm to blanket US east coast after hitting capital

NEW YORK: A powerful winter storm is set to dump feet of snow along a stretch of the US east coast including New York City yesterday, after blanketing the nation's capital. The National Weather Service issued storm warnings from Virginia to Maine—a swathe home to tens of millions of people—and forecast snowfall of 18 to 24 inches (45-60 centimeters) in southern New York, north-eastern New Jersey and parts of southwest Connecticut.

The NWS warned New Yorkers to expect a snowfall rate of two to four inches per hour beginning on Monday, with "near blizzard" conditions closer to the coast. Mayor Bill de Blasio issued a local state of emergency as the city of over eight million braced for the storm, restricting non-essential travel to keep roads clear for emergency vehicles.

"This winter storm will be dangerous with heavy

snowfall and strong winds. If you can stay home, stay home," he said on Twitter. New Jersey governor Phil Murphy also issued a state of emergency ahead of the storm's expected arrival, allowing authorities to close roads, evacuate homes and commandeer equipment needed for public safety.

Public transportation throughout the state will be suspended as of Monday, in anticipation of the storm's impact. "Charge your devices, and if you experience a power outage—report it immediately," he urged New Jersey residents on Twitter.

Philadelphia also declared a snow emergency, closing city government buildings for Monday and ordering residents to move their cars off snow emergency routes so the plows can get through.

"Philly, please be safe and look out for each other," Mayor Jim Kenney tweeted.

The storm is expected to hit Maine by today, where it will drop between eight and 13 inches of snow, as well as sleet. The storm hit mountainous parts of California with more than six feet of snow and heavy rain last week.

Panda-monium

The extreme weather led a chunk of Highway 1 to collapse into the sea, following a landslide in an area near the mountainous Big Sur coastline in the cen-

"The NHS vaccination program, nurses, GPs and other NHS staff have offered the life-saving jab to people living at more than 10,000 care homes with older residents," said NHS England. A small number of homes have had their visits deferred due to severe local outbreaks, and will be seen shortly, while some residents were unable to receive their first dose "for other clinical reasons", it added.

"Today marks a crucial milestone in our ongoing race to vaccinate the most vulnerable against this deadly disease," said Prime Minister Boris Johnson. "We said we would prioritize and protect care home residents, and that is exactly what we have done."

But he warned of "difficult moments to come". "The number of cases and people in hospital



WASHINGTON, DC: People enjoy the snow dusted National Mall in Washington, DC not far from the US Capitol on Sunday as the capital region is under a winter storm warning through Monday night for an expected five or more inches (12.7 centimeters) of snow. —AFP

tral part of the western state. The snow later moved on to the Midwest, dumping about eight inches of snow in Chicago, according to the NWS. Snowfall began overnight Saturday to Sunday in Washington. A winter storm warning from the NWS predicted between three and five inches in the area around Washington and Baltimore, Maryland. —AFP

remains dangerously high." Another 21,088 cases were recorded on Sunday with 34,783 still in hospital, including 3,832 on ventilation.

Britain is under a third national lockdown as it battles a new strain of the virus and has recorded more than 106,000 deaths from the disease—the worst toll in Europe. It was the first Western country to begin a vaccination campaign and has so far jabbed nearly nine million people.

The government has set a target of vaccinating 15 million by mid-February, representing the country's most vulnerable and at risk groups. The country is currently using Pfizer/BioNTech and AstraZeneca vaccines, which will be joined in the next few months by the Moderna vaccine. —AFP

UK hits COVID vaccination 'landmark' in care homes

LONDON: All elderly people living in English care homes who are eligible for the coronavirus vaccine have now been offered their first injection, the National Health Service (NHS) announced yesterday.



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