

International

WHO expert slams US pandemic intel as curbs tightened in Europe

Merkel eyes extension of virus curbs, EU defends faltering vaccine rollout

WUHAN: A WHO expert sent to China to probe the coronavirus hit out at US intelligence on COVID-19 as his team headed home with few answers about the origin of a pandemic that was forcing more clampdowns in some of the hardest-hit parts of the world.

disengaged under Trump & frankly wrong on many aspects." He said they worked "flat out under the most politically charged environment possible".

China had repeatedly delayed the WHO trip, and bristled at accusations of a lack of transparency. Beijing

Leyen was due to explain the EU's vaccine strategy to the European Parliament in Brussels yesterday, with the bloc's leadership under growing pressure.

At the same time, the resurgence of infections across the continent is adding to the pressure on its leadership. A stricter lockdown will be imposed in Greece from Thursday-in particular in the Athens region-as Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis warned that his country was facing a third COVID-19 wave. Wary of infection numbers exploding again, German Chancellor Angela Merkel will seek to extend strict curbs at least until the end of February as fatigue grows with the partial lockdown in Europe's top economy. Immunization efforts are being ramped in other parts of the world with a number of vaccines. Peru on Tuesday began administering shots developed by China's Sinopharm, while Argentina approved the Indian-made version of the AstraZeneca vaccine. South Korea yesterday also authorized the AstraZeneca shot for people aged 18 and above, including over-65s. Japan will start vaccinations next week but it is scrambling to secure suitable syringes so doses won't go to waste.

Valentine's Day worries

Along with mass vaccinations, researchers and engineers around the world are searching for other ways to help end the pandemic and return life to normal-especially international travel.

Tech-savvy Estonia is working on a pilot project with the WHO on how a globally recognized electronic vaccine certificate might work, including addressing concerns about security and privacy. A more immediate concern for authorities in many countries this week is Valentine's Day, with fears that the upcoming celebrations could lead to a surge in infections. Authorities in Thailand's capital Bangkok announced the city would not register marriages on Valentine's Day, a popular day for weddings.

In Brussels, however, where restaurants are closed, some hotels have converted rooms into private dining salons for two. "We're over the moon about being here tonight, just like in a restaurant," said Marine Deroo, a 34-year-old who tried out the concept ahead of Valentine's Day. — AFP



WUHAN, China: Tianhe WHO team member Peter Ben Embarek (center) and other members of the group arrive at Tianhe International Airport to leave Wuhan in China's central Hubei province yesterday, after the World Health Organization (WHO) team wrapped up its investigation into the origins of the COVID-19. — AFP

German Chancellor Angela Merkel was set to seek an extension of strict virus curbs, as the European Commission chief prepared to defend the stumbling vaccination rollout in the continent-which accounts for a third of the 2.3 million COVID-19 deaths worldwide. The coronavirus has infected close to 107 million people, devastating the global economy, and questions over the handling of the initial outbreak in central China sparked an intense diplomatic row between Washington and Beijing. The WHO mission to the ground zero city of Wuhan wrapped up Tuesday without any concrete answers, with Washington again expressing skepticism about China's transparency and cooperation.

But WHO team member Peter Daszak tweeted: "Please don't rely too much on US intel: increasingly

warned Washington not to "politicize" the mission after the White House demanded a "robust" probe. State Department spokesman Ned Price said Tuesday that the United States supports the investigation. But when asked if China had fully cooperated with the WHO, he said: "The jury's still out." The WHO team did not identify which animal transferred the coronavirus to humans, but said there was no indication it was circulating in Wuhan before December 2019, when the first official cases were recorded. WHO expert Peter Ben Embarek also scotched the controversial theory that the virus may have leaked from a lab in Wuhan.

Vaccine, surge worries in Europe

European Commission President Ursula von der

Pilots reported multiple problems with Indonesia jet before crash

JAKARTA: Indonesian pilots had reported multiple problems with an ageing jet's throttle system before it plunged into the sea after takeoff in January, killing 62 passengers and crew, investigators said yesterday. The malfunction in the Sriwijaya Air Boeing 737-500's engine control system was highlighted in a preliminary report on the January 9 crash, but investigators said it was too early to pinpoint an exact cause.

The 26-year-old plane-previously flown by US-based Continental Airlines and United Airlines-plunged around 3,000 meters (10,000 feet) into waters off Jakarta just minutes after takeoff.

Divers are still attempting to locate the cockpit voice recorder, which could provide vital clues to what the desperate crew was saying when the flight from Jakarta to Pontianak in Borneo went down.

Yesterday investigators said they were probing the autothrottle system-and possible human error. Crews on previous flights had reported that the system was "unserviceable" and it had been repaired several times before the fatal crash, the report said.

"The left (engine throttle) was moving backward too far while the right one was not moving at all-it was stuck," said National Transportation Safety Committee investigator Nurcahyo Utomo. "But what would have caused this anomaly? We can't conclude anything just yet." Communications with air traffic control were

described as normal up until the moment the plane deviated from its course and crashed. Despite appeals from air traffic controllers, the crew-including an experienced captain-did not respond to questions about the plane's change of direction.

Red flag

Analysts say a faulty autothrottle could explain the aircraft's unexpected turn and subsequent dive. But it was still unclear why the crew did not switch off the system and take manual control of the plane. "The aircraft... had previous known maintenance problems immediately prior to the crash," said Stephen Wright, professor of aircraft systems at Finland's Tampere University. Repeated attempts to fix the system was a red flag and may be a key factor in the crash, he added. "Technical problems are usually manageable," said Jakarta-based aviation analyst Gerry Soejatman.

Divers have recovered the plane's flight data recorder, but were still searching for the cockpit voice recorder (CVR), which tracks flight crew conversations. "That's why we need the CVR to see whether there are human factors" involved, he added. There no indication that the bad weather played a pivotal role in the accident, authorities said, adding that two other commercial planes flew the same route without incident just before and after the plane. — AFP



JAKARTA: This file picture shows Indonesian navy divers standing next to the flight data recorder (FDR) at the port in Tanjung Priok in Jakarta after it was recovered. — AFP

Senators transfixed by riot footage shown at Trump trial

WASHINGTON: With footage of a pro-Trump mob storming the US Capitol playing out in their chamber, US senators sat transfixed before the shocking images that dominated the start of the former president's impeachment trial. Despite the sergeant at arms' command that all 100 senators remain silent "on pain of imprisonment," an informal, detached mood descended Tuesday on the Senate's Republican side, where many lawmakers have said they oppose holding the unprecedented second trial of Donald Trump.

Chitter-chatter swirled. Marco Rubio flipped non-committal through a thick book. A sockless Richard Burr, bracing for a marathon session, stuffed his desk

with snacks. Freshman Senator Cynthia Lummis, perhaps not having received the memo about coronavirus precautions, sat maskless for 30 minutes as she pored over documents. Even as top Senate Democrat Chuck Schumer opened the proceedings by describing the incitement of insurrection allegation against Trump as "the gravest charges ever brought against a president of the United States," many Republicans met the declaration with a collective shrug. And conservative Senator Tom Cotton made a point of working on a spreadsheet instead of focusing on the debate about the constitutionality of the trial. But when Democratic impeachment manager Jamie Raskin played a 13-minute video montage depicting some of the most violent clashes of the deadly January 6 siege, the chamber fell under a hush, with senators riveted by the graphic images and chaotic audio.

Republicans and Democrats alike sat rigid as some of the coarsest epithets ever to color a Senate proceeding rang out in the chamber. Then, they watched the chilling images of a self-described QAnon shaman and other invaders taking over the Senate itself after many of the

News in brief

Prince Charles gets COVID-19 jab

LONDON: Queen Elizabeth II's eldest son and heir Prince Charles, who contracted COVID-19 last year, has received a first vaccine dose, his office said yesterday. The 72-year-old Prince of Wales and his wife Camilla, 73, both received the shot as health authorities urged those over the age of 70 to get a jab. Britain, which was the first Western nation to roll out Covid jabs in the general population, is banking on its biggest ever vaccination program as a way out of a contagion that has killed more than 113,000 people. Some 12.5 million people have so far been inoculated using either the Pfizer/BioNTech or Oxford/AstraZeneca shots. — AFP

One killed in US health clinic shooting

WASHINGTON: One person was killed and four others wounded Tuesday when a man who was unhappy with the treatment he had received at a Minnesota health clinic opened fire inside the facility, authorities and US media said. Police arrested the suspected shooter, identified as Gregory Ulrich, 67, who was known to law enforcement from previous encounters. He allegedly went into the Allina Health Clinic in Buffalo, Minnesota just before 11:00 am (1700 GMT) and opened fire. Images on local television showed the clinic with several blown-out windows, though it was not clear if this was from an explosion or from gunfire. — AFP

BioNTech starts production in Germany

BERLIN: German COVID-19 vaccine maker BioNTech said yesterday it has started production at its new facility in Marburg, expected to significantly boost the EU's vaccine supply. "We have started the first step of vaccine production in our production facility in Marburg," the company said in a statement. The factory, whose launch was fast-tracked by German authorities, will produce mRNA, the active ingredient in BioNTech's vaccine developed with US pharmaceutical giant Pfizer. It will then be purified and concentrated before being transported to a "production partner" to be finished. — AFP

Russia virus caseload passes 4 million

MOSCOW: Russia officially surpassed four million coronavirus infections yesterday, days after the country dramatically revised upwards its fatality rate, cementing its place as one of the world's worst-hit nations. A government tally showed infections had reached 4,012,710, which is the fourth-highest rate globally after the United States, India and Brazil. But Russia has come under fire for its official virus statistics and the government's stated death toll of 78,134 in particular has been undermined by recent mortality data. — AFP

Syringe shortage hits Japan drive

TOKYO: Japan will start coronavirus vaccinations next week, its prime minister said yesterday, but it is scrambling to secure suitable syringes so doses won't go to waste. The country has reached deals with three major drug firms to buy enough vaccine doses for its population of 126 million. But it has not yet announced a detailed roll-out plan for the jabs, less than six months before the pandemic-postponed Olympics begin. The Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine is likely to become the first jab approved for use in Japan in the coming days, following domestic clinical trials required by the country's health authorities. — AFP

Australian pleads guilty

SYDNEY: An Australian man once described as a "loyal agent of North Korea" pleaded guilty yesterday to attempting to broker arms, oil and coal deals for Pyongyang in breach of international sanctions. North Korea is under tough curbs aimed at choking off revenue to its nuclear and missile programs. South Korean-born Chan Han Choi was on trial in the New South Wales Supreme Court when he pleaded guilty to two of the seven charges against him. — AFP

lawmakers-the same ones sitting as jurors Tuesday-lfled for their lives.

"It's not very often you have a trial at the scene of the crime," Democratic Senator Chris Murphy told AFP shortly before the proceedings began, speaking of the emotion that could weigh on senators as they sit in judgment of Trump. "It was our chamber that was violated," he added. "We were all party to the insurrection, we experienced it first-hand," said another Democrat, Senator Ben Cardin. "It's something that's personal to those of us who were in harm's way." But Republican Senator Bill Cassidy said he would not be caught up in such passions. "The settings in which we hold the trial do not make (the events of January 6) more vivid for me," Cassidy said. "They're vivid enough in and of themselves." They were for Raskin, too. The congressman from Maryland, managing the arguments against Trump just six weeks after his son died by suicide, choked up as he recalled how his daughter and his son-in-law, visiting the Capitol that day, "thought they were going to die." Raskin pointed to the multiple deaths and gruesome injuries suffered during the insurrection. — AFP



ISTANBUL: In this file photo students chant slogans in front of the Bogazici University in Istanbul during a protest against the direct appointment of a new rector the University by the Turkish President. — AFP

Turkish student protests feed anti-Erdogan anger

ISTANBUL: Fenced in by riot police, Zeynep Kurbanzade stands with her university classmates in daily protest against the rector picked by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who has ruled Turkey since she was just one year old. Small in number, loud in voice and filled with a thirst for change, the Bogazici University students are posing a worrisome challenge to the 66-year-old Turkish leader, who has responded by flooding the streets with police. For the religiously conservative Erdogan, their social media-driven campaign-now in its second month-has ominous echoes of 2013 protests that began in defense of an Istanbul park before morphing into a national movement. For the students, the appointment of Melih Bulu, a losing parliamentary candidate from Erdogan's ruling party who denies claims of plagiarizing his doctorate thesis, as head of the elite Istanbul institution was the last straw in a life filled with discontent. "We are not happy with the economy, we are not happy with the growing pressure," Kurbanzade, 19, told AFP outside the campus, which has been besieged by police barricades since the start of the year.

"Acts of femicide go unpunished, mobsters walk free from jail and are given the red carpet treatment, but our friends are detained because of a tweet. We don't accept this," she said. Police have fired rubber bullets and tear gas while detaining hundreds across Istanbul and in smaller solidarity rallies in big cities such as Ankara and Izmir.

Although most are quickly released, the jailings and heavy-handed police tactics remind many of the sweeping powers Erdogan has assumed since surviving a coup bid in 2016, which was followed by a punishing social and political crackdown. "A mood of discontent-from the presidential regime to the economic collapse-has found a new form of expression through Bogazici," said Zeynep Gambetti, an associate professor of political theory at the university.

Culture wars

After initially ignoring the protests, Erdogan this month decided to turn them into part of a broader culture war being waged across Turkey's deeply polarized society. For the first time since assuming power in 2003, he unleashed several verbal assaults on the LGBT movement, blaming it for the protests with a venom that drew immediate condemnation from the United States and the European Union. "Don't pay attention to what those lesbians say," he told a group of female supporters last week, defending Bulu's appointment as lawful. The students have responded to Erdogan on the streets and on Twitter, with several who run the protests' social media accounts jailed and charged with insulting the president. — AFP