

International

WHO China mission set to begin as US demands 'robust' origin probe

EU, Britain kick up row over vaccine

WUHAN: World Health Organization experts emerged from quarantine in China yesterday to begin a long-awaited investigation into the origins of the devastating coronavirus pandemic, which has shown no signs of slowing down. Global infections have shot past 100 million and governments are scrambling to get their hands on scarce vaccine doses, with a bitter row erupting between the European Union and Britain over the supply of AstraZeneca shots.

Beijing has so far frustrated international efforts to track the origins of the virus, which has killed more than 2.1 million people globally, and only recently allowed the WHO team into China after repeated delays. The experts left their Wuhan quarantine hotel in a bus, wearing masks and peering at the media crowded outside, but it was not confirmed when they will get to start their investigation in the ground-zero city, or what they will be allowed to see.

China has sought to deflect blame for the massive global human and economic toll by suggesting—without proof—that the virus emerged somewhere else. It has also been enraged by calls led by the United States and Australia for an independent probe. “It’s imperative that we get to the bottom of the early days of the pandemic in China, and we’ve been supportive of an international investigation that we feel should be robust and clear,” White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said Wednesday. She also expressed concern about the “misinformation” from “some sources in China”.

Beijing shot back Thursday, warning against “political interference” in the WHO mission. Relatives of those who died in Wuhan have accused Chinese authorities of deleting their social media group and putting pressure on them to keep quiet, apparently to avoid any embarrassment during the WHO probe.

EU-Britain vaccine row

The pandemic has surged despite many nations kicking off mass vaccination programs, and one major issue in recent weeks has been demand for jabs far outstripping supply. With cases surging

across Europe, the EU has demanded that AstraZeneca make up for delays by supplying doses from its factories in the UK. But Britain has told the firm to honor its delivery promises too as it tries to accelerate its program, even using historic sites such as the Salisbury Cathedral and Lord’s cricket ground as vaccination centers. AstraZeneca has said there is simply not enough to go around.

At least 90 million doses of that vaccine, which AstraZeneca developed with the University of Oxford, will be produced in Japan, government spokesman Katsunobu Kato said yesterday, but local media said they may not be distributed until May. Pfizer, which developed its successful vaccine with BioNTech, has revised higher its production target for this year from 1.3 billion doses to two billion. While part of that is down to increased production, it is also impacted by a change in how the firm counts doses—after initially saying each vial contained five, the pharma giant now says six shots can be extracted.

Olympics doubts

Vaccines are considered critical to eventually defeating COVID-19, which has continued to re-

emerge even in nations where it was brought under control. New Zealand confirmed two new cases of the more virulent South African strain yesterday, days after an initial case that ended a run of more than two months without community transmission. The Pacific nation topped a list published yesterday by the Lowy Institute, a top Australian think tank, assessing almost 100 countries on how they managed the pandemic. Brazil was ranked the worst, at number 98, with Mexico, Colombia, Iran and the United States also near the bottom.

Vietnam, which made the top 10, yesterday reported its first community transmission in nearly two months. The lack of success globally in containing the pandemic sparked doubts about whether the delayed Tokyo Olympics can be held at all this year. The head of the International Olympic Committee insisted it was committed to holding the Games, but admitted for the first time that fans may be barred. “This I cannot tell you,” Thomas Bach said, when asked if fans would be able to attend. “Our priority is to ensure safe Olympic Games and we will do whatever is needed to organize safe Olympic Games.” — AFP



WUHAN: Members of the World Health Organization (WHO) team investigating the origins of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic leave The Jade Hotel on a bus after completing their quarantine in Wuhan, China’s central Hubei province yesterday. — AFP

Indonesian gay couple whipped for Sharia-banned sex

BANDA ACEH, Indonesia: A gay couple were flogged in Indonesia’s conservative Aceh province yesterday, justice officials said, in a public spectacle lambasted by human rights groups. The two men were whipped nearly 80 times each for having gay sex, which is outlawed in Aceh province under local Islamic law.

The pair, who were not identified, winced in pain and pleaded for the whipping to stop, as a masked sharia officer beat their backs with a rattan

stick. The punishment was briefly halted and the men, both in their twenties, were allowed a drink of water before it continued.

The mother of one man fainted at the sight of her son being whipped. “Islamic sharia enforcement is final, no matter who it is, and even visitors must respect local norms,” public order official Heru Triwijanarko said. The men were arrested in November at a rental home where a landlord found them half-naked in their room. Gay sex is not ille-

gal elsewhere in Indonesia and Aceh is the only region in the world’s biggest Muslim nation that imposes the sharia law.

In Aceh, on the northern tip of Sumatra island, public flogging is a common punishment for a range of offences that include gambling, drinking alcohol and adultery. Four others were whipped between 17 and 40 times on the same day over allegations they drank alcohol or met with members of the opposite sex. Human rights groups slam public caning as cruel, and Indonesia’s President Joko Widodo has called for it to end.

But it has strong support among Aceh’s population. The region started using religious law after it was granted special autonomy in 2001, an attempt by the central government to quell a long-running separatist insurgency. — AFP

Vietnam reports first virus outbreak in nearly two months

HANOI: Vietnam recorded its first coronavirus outbreak in almost two months yesterday, with more than 80 new cases reported as authorities began testing tens of thousands of people to contain the spread. The infections were detected in northern Vietnam, with one cluster linked to a case of the more contagious coronavirus variant first spotted in Britain.

The figure was a new daily record for the communist nation, which has been widely praised for its handling of the pandemic—recording just over 1,500 cases before the new cluster and only 35 deaths. The latest outbreak in the provinces of Hai Duong and Quang Ninh is “more complicated and serious” than anything Vietnam has dealt with before, Deputy Prime Minister Vu Duc Dam said.

“We aim to isolate and fight the outbreak to prevent its spread as quickly as possible.”

In Hai Duong province, the cases are thought to be linked to a factory worker who tested positive for the virus when she landed in the Japanese city of Osaka. She was found to have the British variant. The town where the factory is located has been closed off, while medical workers are rushing to test tens of thousands of people in the area. In Quang Ninh, which is on the border with China, one of those infected is a security official at Van Don airport, where international passengers have been arriving before being sent into mandatory quarantine. The airport has been shut while passenger vehicles are banned from leaving or entering the province.

The outbreak comes at a sensitive time for Vietnam. Its twice-in-a-decade Communist Party congress began on Tuesday to select new leadership. A long Lunar New Year break will follow in February, when millions of people are expected to travel to see their families.

Vietnam last recorded a community transmission case of the virus in December. It has kept virus numbers low thanks to mass quarantines, extensive contact-tracing and strict controls on movement. Most inbound commercial flights have been suspended since March but Vietnamese citizens stuck abroad and some foreigners have been allowed to enter. — AFP