



India farmers, police in road showdowns as protests worsen

Fauci says Biden 'attuned to science,' credits Trump for vaccines

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NEW YORK: Photo dated Dec 9, 2020 shows a lab technician putting on protective gloves before opening the vaccine freezer during a dry run at Mount Sinai Hospital ahead of an expected Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine shipment over the weekend. — AFP

## US approves Pfizer COVID vaccine

Millions of doses begin shipping • White House told FDA chief to approve vaccine or quit

WASHINGTON: The US green-lit the Pfizer-BioNTech Covid-19 vaccine late Friday, paving the way for millions of vulnerable people to receive their shots in the world's hardest-hit country. President Donald Trump immediately released a video on Twitter, where he hailed the news as a "medical miracle" and said the first immunizations would take place "in less than 24 hours".

It comes as infections across America soar as never before, with the grim milestone of 300,000 confirmed deaths fast approaching. The US is now the sixth country to approve the two-dose regimen, after Britain, Bahrain, Canada, Saudi Arabia and Mexico. The move came earlier than expected and capped a day of drama after it was widely reported that the White House had threatened to fire Food and Drug Administration chief Stephen Hahn if he did not grant emergency approval Friday.

Trump's intervention reinserts politics into the scientific process, which some experts have said could undermine vaccine confidence. The US is

seeking to inoculate 20 million people this month alone, with long-term care facility residents and health care workers at the front of the line. The government also said Friday that it is buying 100 million more doses of the Moderna vaccine candidate, amid reports the administration passed on the opportunity to secure more supply of the Pfizer jab.

The purchase brings its total supply of Moderna doses to 200 million, enough to immunize 100 million people with the two-shot regimen that could be approved as early as next week. Both frontrunners are based on mRNA (messenger ribonucleic acid), a major victory for a technology that had never previously been proven. Two other vaccine candidates stumbled Friday: France's Sanofi and Britain's GSK said their vaccine would not be ready until the end of 2021.

In Peru, clinical trials of a vaccine made by Chinese drug giant Sinopharm were suspended after neurological problems were detected in a test volunteer. And in Australia the development of a vaccine at the University of Queensland was

abandoned Friday after clinical trials produced a false positive HIV result among subjects involved in early testing.

### Sputnik mix

The mixed news on the vaccine front came as infections accelerated fast in North America and parts of Africa but started to stabilize in Europe and drop in Asia and the Middle East. Around the world more than 1.58 million lives have been lost to COVID-19, according to an AFP tally from official sources. Brazil on Friday crossed 180,000 deaths, despite President Jair Bolsonaro's insistence the crisis was at the "tail end."

But across the Pacific Ocean, New Zealand, which has been praised for its handling of the virus, took its first tentative steps towards reopening its borders with the tiny Cook Islands. Less good news arrived in South Korea - a country previously held up as a model of how to combat the pandemic - which reported its highest daily number of new cases so far, with a surge centered

around Seoul, sparking fears the country could lose control of the spread.

Officials there announced 950 new infections after several days reporting numbers ranging from about 500 to 600. And in China, where the virus first emerged a year ago but has since been brought under control, two cities on the border with Russia reported one local infection each, sparking mass tests in both and a full lockdown in one of them. Countries which have approved the Pfizer-BioNTech jab meanwhile were preparing for rollout, as the World Health Organization warned of a potentially grim Christmas season.

Following Britain's lead, the first vaccine shipments to 14 sites across Canada are scheduled to arrive tomorrow with people receiving shots a day or two later. Israel, which accepted its first shipment of the Pfizer vaccine on Wednesday, is targeting a rollout on Dec 27. And Hong Kong said Friday it had struck deals for two vaccines - one from Pfizer and the other from Beijing-based Sinovac - with plans to launch a campaign in early 2021. — AFP

## Morocco's Jews toast Israel deal

CASABLANCA: Casablanca's "Madame Falh" bakery is famed for its delicious kosher bread, but in its busy queue there was only one thing on people's lips - a deal between Morocco and Israel. "Everyone is talking about it, whether it's our Jewish clients, who make up half of our customers, or Muslims," said Kevin Falh, the 36-year-old grandson of the founder of this baking institution. Morocco on Thursday became the fourth Arab nation this year to agree to normalize relations with Israel, following the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Sudan.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said liaison offices would be reopened in Tel Aviv and Rabat, which Morocco closed in 2000 at the start of the second Palestinian uprising, and establish full diplomatic relations "as rapidly as possible". Morocco confirmed the deal, saying King Mohammed VI had told outgoing US President Donald Trump his country had agreed to establish diplomatic rela-

tions with Israel "with minimal delay".

Falh, speaking in the middle of the rush for Madame Falh's special bread baked according to religious requirements ahead of Shabbat, Judaism's holy day of rest, said it was a moment to celebrate. "Since the normalization announced by the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, we had to be on the list. Finally, it came," said Falh, who is especially eager for direct flights to Israel to begin.

### 'Greatest respect'

As customers waited for their fresh bread, one lady in her 40s described how people had reacted to the news of the deal. "The entire Jewish community in Morocco was in joy," said the woman, who asked not to be named. "This is a very strong and very courageous gesture on the part of King Mohammed VI," she said, adding that the deal "will have a positive impact on Moroccans in general, not only for Jews."

But she said it also worried her. In Muslim-majority Morocco, the Jewish community - once the largest in North Africa - has dwindled from more than a quarter of a million in the 1950s down to less than 3,000 today. "I'm afraid that protests will break out, that a rift will be created between the communities, that misunderstandings



CASABLANCA: Members of the Moroccan Jewish community buy pastries at a kosher shop in this western Moroccan port city on Friday. — AFP

will prevail," she said.

But a worker in the store smoothed over concerns. "We have had very cordial relations for a very long time," said the man in his 60s. "We have never had any problems. We work together with the greatest respect." At the Amsellem butchery, another culinary institution in central Casablanca's district with the last Jewish stores, owner Jacques Bitton said he did "not stop receiving calls from Moroccans-Jews and Muslims - all satisfied with this decision".

Bitton said he was "very happy" at the development of relations between his country and the Jewish state. "I have family in Israel, a first cousin who is in the government," said Bitton. "I spoke with him; he was ecstatic." In Israel, there are some 700,000 Jews of Moroccan origin - many of whom have kept strong links with the kingdom, including celebrating its culinary and musical traditions. Most Moroccan Jews left with their families in the early 1950s, after Israel declared its independence. — AFP

## Austria court overturns school headscarf ban

VIENNA: Austria's constitutional court on Friday struck down a law introduced last year which banned the headscarf in primary schools, saying the measure was unconstitutional and discriminatory. In a statement explaining the decision, the court said the law "contravened the principle of equality in relation to freedom of religion, belief and conscience". The law prevented girls younger than 10 from wearing the headscarf and had been challenged by two children and their parents.

The measure was passed in May 2019 under the previous coalition of the center-right People's Party

(OeVP) and the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ), just days before that government collapsed due to a corruption scandal. Both parties had made anti-immigration rhetoric and warnings against "parallel societies" a key part of their political messaging and their spokespersons made it clear at the time that the law was targeting the headscarf.

However, the text of the legislation attempted to avoid charges of discrimination by banning "ideologically or religiously influenced clothing which is associated with the covering of the head". Nevertheless, the court said that the law could only be understood as targeting Islamic head coverings. The OeVP-FPÖ government had itself said that the patka head covering worn by Sikh boys or the Jewish kippa would not be affected. The new OeVP-Green party coalition that took office in January had planned to extend the ban for girls under 14. The current OeVP Education Minister Heinz Fassmann said that the ministry would "take note of the judgment and look into its argu-

ments". "I regret that girls will not have the opportunity to make their way through the education system free from compulsion," he added.

In its statement the court said that far from promoting integration, "the ban could... lead to discrimination as it runs the risk of making it more difficult for Muslim girls to access education and socially excluding them". The IGGÖe, the body officially recognized as representing the country's Muslim communities, welcomed the judgement and said the court had ended "the populist politics of bans".

IGGÖe President Umit Vural said in a statement: "We don't condone disparaging attitudes towards women who decide against the headscarf... and we also cannot agree with the curtailing of the religious freedom of those Muslim women who understand the headscarf to be an integral part of their lived religious practice." The IGGÖe had said at the time of the ban that in any case only a "minuscule number" of girls would be affected. — AFP

## 'Shrine factions' look to peel away from Hashed

NAJAF: Around the corner from Iraq's holiest shrines, a years-long struggle over allegiances and resources is coming to a head - threatening a dangerous schism within a powerful state-sponsored security force. The growing fissure pits the vast Iran-aligned wing of the Hashed al-Shaabi network against four factions linked to the shrines of Iraq's twin holy cities, Karbala and Najaf. Those factions, dubbed "the Shrine Hashed" and comprising around 20,000 active fighters, held their first strategic planning meeting earlier this month.

Throughout the packed three days, spokesmen for the shrine groups leaned on two sources of legitimacy: a patriotic, "Iraq-only" discourse, and the blessing of the "marjaiyah," Iraq's Shiite spiritual leadership. "The Shrine Hashed are the origin of the broader Hashed," Hazem Sakhr, a spokesman for the four factions, told AFP. "We are committed to Iraqi law and the marjaiyah's orders."

Maytham Al-Zaidi, the prominent commander of the largest shrine group known as the Abbas Combat Division, struck a nationalistic, reformist tone. "The main reasons for establishing the Shrine Hashed is to serve our country, and to correct both its track record and trajectory," he said. Ali Al-Hamdani, who heads the 3,000-member Ali al-Akbar Brigade, said the meeting - held in Najaf and Karbala - was "exclusively" for the Shrine Hashed, setting their future apart from the rest. Hamdi Malik, a London-based expert on Shiite factions, said the shrine groups were now publicly insisting on a separation. "They are escalating with this new conference, and want to accelerate that process," Malik told AFP.

The Hashed al-Shaabi network was formed in 2014 when Iraq's top Shiite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, issued an edict urging citizens to fight the advancing Sunni extremists of the Islamic State group. His call brought together already-existing paramilitary factions and new formations, including the Shrine Hashed. But internal disputes emerged as early as 2016, with Malik pointing to three main fault lines. — AFP