

International

Trump: Fauci remarks on reopening schools and economy unacceptable

US accuses China-linked hackers of stealing virus research

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump on Wednesday described as not acceptable a warning given by top US infectious disease expert Anthony Fauci this week about the dangers of reopening the economy and schools too quickly. "To me it's not an acceptable answer, especially when it comes to schools," Trump told reporters at the White House when asked about Fauci's warnings to senators on Tuesday about the risks of reopening the schools and economy too soon.

Fauci, who directs the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, also warned that a premature lifting of lockdowns could lead to additional outbreaks of the deadly coronavirus, which has killed more than 82,000 people in the United States and brought the economy to its knees. Trump, in contrast, said on Wednesday the only thing that would be acceptable would be professors or teachers "over a certain age" not holding classes. "I think they ought to take it easy for another few weeks," he added. The president, who previously made the strength of the economy central to his pitch for re-election in November, has encouraged states to reopen businesses and schools that were shuttered to halt the spread of the highly contagious respiratory disease.

Fauci, 79, a proponent of the lockdowns, has become a target for criticism from the American far right and online conspiracy theorists since he made statements about the outbreak that were at odds with Trump's.

In April, Trump retweeted a call to fire Fauci, after the doctor said lives could have been saved if the country had shut down sooner, spurring

speculation his days in the administration could be numbered.

"Anthony is a good person, a very good person, I've disagreed with him," Trump said in an interview earlier on Wednesday with Fox Business Network's "Mornings with Maria," repeating his refrain that the country must reopen. "We want to do it safely, but we also want to do it as quickly as possible. ... We have to get it open. I totally disagree with him on schools," Trump said. Asked about Trump's comments, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio told CNN that Fauci was "sounding an honest voice of caution and I share his view." "I think we have to be very careful about the steps we take."

China-linked hackers are breaking into American organizations carrying out research into COVID-19, US officials said on Wednesday, warning both scientists and public health officials to be on the lookout for cyber theft. In a joint statement, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Department of Homeland Security said the FBI was investigating digital break-ins at US organizations by China-linked "cyber actors" that it had monitored "attempting to identify and illicitly obtain valuable intellectual property (IP) and public health data related to vaccines, treatments, and testing from networks and personnel affiliated with COVID-19-related research."

The statement offered no further details on the identities of the targets or the hackers. The Chinese Embassy in Washington condemned the allegations as "lies."

"The FBI issued a warning based on presumption of guilt and without any evidence," the



WASHINGTON, DC: US Senator Lisa Murkowski, US Senator Mike Braun, US Senator Rand Paul listen as Dr Anthony Fauci answers questions during the Senate Committee for Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions hearing on COVID-19 on Wednesday.—AFP

embassy said in a written statement, adding the US accusation "undercuts the ongoing international cooperation against the pandemic." Coronavirus-related research and data have emerged as a key intelligence priority for hackers of all stripes and Western intelligence organizations have repeatedly sounded the alarm over the targeting of public health and pharmaceutical organizations.

In a separate statement issued earlier on Wednesday, the head of New Zealand's signals intelligence agency said it condemned any attempt to target COVID response-related infrastructure. "We call upon all cyber actors to

refrain from activity that may jeopardise national or international responses to the COVID-19 pandemic," said Andrew Hampton, the director-general of New Zealand's Government Communications Security Bureau.

Last week Reuters reported that Iran-linked cyberspies had targeted staff at US drugmaker Gilead Sciences Inc., whose antiviral drug remdesivir is the only treatment so far proven to help COVID-19 patients.

In March and April, Reuters reported on advanced hackers' attempts to break into the World Health Organization as the pandemic spread across the globe.—Reuters

Care home residents get visits via 'box of emotions'

MONTIJO, Portugal: Maria das Mercês struggled to hold back tears after she saw her 90-year-old father at a Portuguese care home - chatting to him from inside a glass booth erected in front of a window to allow elderly residents to visit family during the coronavirus pandemic. "Makes you want to hold him," Mercês, 63, told Reuters after a 15-minute visit to the "box of emotions", as the contraption is known.

"I don't think I would be able to resist if the glass window wasn't here." Opened earlier this month at the Montepio nursing home in the town of Montijo across the River Tagus from Lisbon, the air-conditioned glass box sits outside the building alongside one of the rooms. Residents can sit and talk with their relatives using

a microphone set up on both sides.

Mercês is one of the many Portuguese with relatives in care homes who are finding it tough to cope with a ban on visits imposed to protect the frail residents from contagion as part of a lockdown declared nearly two months ago. Around 14% of the around 2,500 care homes in Portugal reported coronavirus cases, according to the government.

Portugal, which has reported more than 28,000 confirmed cases of the coronavirus and 1,175 deaths - a fraction of the toll in neighboring Spain, started to ease the lockdown on May 4. Care homes will start to open doors again on May 18 under restrictions, including social distancing between visitors and residents.

Chief nurse Patricia Soares believes

care homes should remain shut for longer to protect the vulnerable group. "We want to keep the virus out," she said.

More than 90 elderly people live at the Montepio care home, with many suffering from dementia, making it hard for some to understand why they were not able to see their relatives.

"There were people who didn't understand it, some still don't and think their families abandoned them," said care home president Pedro Santos. "The 'box of emotions' brought joy."

Fatima Sousa, 58, has already used the box three times to visit her 89-year-old aunt Rosa Gordo. "When we got in and saw her on the other side with her hand on the glass...it was not easy and it's still not easy," said a tearful Sousa.—Reuters

EU hopes COVID vaccine will be ready in 2021

AMSTERDAM: A vaccine to counter the new coronavirus could be approved in about a year in an "optimistic" scenario, an agency which approves medicines for the European Union said yesterday. The European Medicines Agency, in communication with 33 developers, was doing all it could to speed up the approval process, the EMA's head of vaccines, Marco Cavaleri, said, but he was skeptical of claims any could be ready by September.

"For vaccines, since the development has to start from scratch ... we might look from an optimistic side in a year from now, so beginning of 2021," he told journalists. He ruled out the possibility of skipping the third phase of a vaccine trial, which he said would be needed to be sure a vaccine was safe and effective.

The EMA is also looking at 115 different therapeutics, or treatments, for the coronavirus, which has killed nearly 300,000 deaths globally, according to World Health Organization data. Cavaleri said some of those therapeutics could be approved in Europe as early as this summer, but he did not specify which.—Reuters