

## International

# Thousands protest coronavirus curbs in Germany over weekend

## India seeks up to 500 million virus vaccine doses by July

**BERLIN:** Thousands of demonstrators in southern Germany protested against coronavirus restrictions over the weekend, police said yesterday, although organizers failed to mobilize enough people for a planned human chain around Lake Constance.

Thousands of counter-demonstrators in Constance also turned out to show support for the government's measures to contain the coronavirus while also protesting against right-wing supporters in the other group, police said. Overall, police counted between 10,500 and 11,000 people taking part in the different demonstrations on Saturday and the two-day protests continued on Sunday with sunny weather likely to draw in further participants, a police spokesman said.

"So far, the situation is calm," the police spokesman added.

Organizers of the protests against coronavirus curbs had initially hoped to mobilize more than 200,000 people. Local authorities had imposed restrictions such as respecting social distancing to avoid further infections. They also banned the use of Germany's imperial Reichsflagge, a symbol used by neo-Nazis and other far-right groups as an alternative to the forbidden swastika flag.

The marches have attracted a mixed crowd of civil rights activists and people who oppose vaccinations, as well as neo-Nazis and members of far-right groups including the opposition party Alternative for Germany (AfD).

During mass marches against coronavirus curbs in Berlin in late August, protesters stormed the steps of

the Reichstag parliament building, some of them holding far-right Reichsflagge. The images went around the world and were condemned by leading German politicians. Germany so far has managed the COVID-19 pandemic relatively well by keeping infections and deaths low compared to other European countries during the first wave in spring. But infection numbers are rising again and authorities are mulling further restrictions which could limit public life and slow down the economic recovery after Germany suffered its worst recession on record in the first half of the year.

Meanwhile, India hopes to receive up to 500 million doses of coronavirus vaccine by July to inoculate about 250 million people, health minister Harsh Vardhan said yesterday, as infections in the world's second-worst affected country continue to surge.

India has recorded some 6.55 million infections, with 75,829 in the past 24 hours, while COVID-19-related deaths have totaled 101,782, health ministry data showed. "There is a high-level expert body going into all aspects of vaccines," Vardhan wrote on Twitter. "Our rough estimate and the target would be to receive and utilize 400 to 500 million doses covering (200 million-250 million) people by July 2021." Serum Institute of India and private companies have been teaming up with organizations from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to US drug developer Novavax Inc in a scramble to secure vaccines for the country of 1.3 billion people.

### India records 6.55 million infections



**KONSTANZ:** People take part in a protest against masks and virus restrictions during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic (novel coronavirus) in Konstanz, southern Germany yesterday. —AFP

India has set up committees to look into various aspects of the vaccine supply chain, including availability timelines for various vaccines, while obtaining commitments from manufacturers to ensure the maximum doses are available, Vardhan said. He said the federal government is committed to taking all measures to ensure "fair and equitable" distribution of vaccines once they are ready.

The South Asian nation, second only to the United States in caseload, has scope for higher infections as a large chunk of the population remains unexposed to the virus, a survey showed on Tuesday.

To prioritize the distribution of coronavirus vaccines, the health ministry aims to prepare a list of key personnel, such as frontline health workers, by the end of the month. —Reuters

## Sufi pilgrims begin to converge on Senegal's holy city

**DAKAR, Senegal:** Hordes of pilgrims in Senegal have begun to converge on the holy city of Touba, ahead of a giant traditional celebration tomorrow known as the Grand Magal, despite the threat of coronavirus.

The religious festival of the Mouride brotherhood, a powerful Sufi Muslim order, celebrates the date French colonial authorities exiled its leader Sheikh Amadou Bamba, known as Serigne Touba.

It is one of the most important dates on the religious calendar in Senegal, and usually attracts hundreds of thousands of worshippers from across the West African country. But this year's Magal marks the first mass festival of its kind in Senegal since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, raising fears of a potential superspreader event. Religious authorities are confident they have the situation in control, however.

"We can be reassured because Serigne Touba will erect a shield between the disease and us," the brotherhood's spokesman told local media this month.

## Suspected Russian hitman on trial over Berlin killing

**BERLIN:** A Russian man goes on trial Wednesday accused of assassinating a former Chechen commander in a Berlin park on Moscow's orders, a case that has cast a pall over ties between Russia and Germany. Vadim K., also known as Vadim S., stands accused of gunning down a Georgian national identified by German authorities as 40-year-old Tornike K., in Kleiner Tiergarten park on August 23 last year. German prosecutors, who do not release the full names of suspects ahead of criminal trials, have said the contract killing was carried out at the behest of Russia, prompting Berlin to expel two Russian diplomats. Moscow has denied the allegations, taking tit-for-tat action against Berlin.

Chancellor Angela Merkel said in May that the killing "disrupts a cooperation of trust" between Berlin and Moscow and some analysts have suggested the murder has led to a change in her approach towards Russia. The German leader has always stressed the importance of keeping dialogue open with her Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin, but she has sharpened her tone in recent months. The trial comes at a time of European anger with Russia over the poisoning of Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny, who is receiving treatment in the German capital. Germany has said that

In contrast to previous celebrations, the Mourides will hold no official ceremony this year, and will stream conferences online. Worshippers will also have to wear facemasks, and queue in single file to enter the lavish Great Mosque of Touba.

More than 90 percent of Senegal is Muslim and most of the faithful follow Sufi brotherhoods, which retain considerable economic and political clout in the nation of 16 million people.

### Holy city

The Magal-when means 'celebration' in the Wolof language-celebrates the life and teachings of Sheikh Amadou Bamba, the Mouride Brotherhood's founder who died in 1927. A peaceful opponent of colonialism, French authorities exiled him to Gabon from 1895 to 1902, and then to Mauritania from 1903 to 1907 before he was allowed to return to Senegal, where he was placed under house arrest at his home in the north of the country.

The religious leader founded the holy city of Touba, in the centre of Senegal, in 1888. It has since grown to be Senegal's second-largest after the capital Dakar, with some 1.5 million inhabitants.

As well as being a religious festival, the Magal has a political dimension too, with senior politicians often making an appearance. Health officials will be keeping a close eye on the huge crowds this year, but the government has endorsed the brotherhood's ability to manage the event.

tests it carried out found that the 44-year-old was poisoned with the Soviet-era deadly nerve agent Novichok. France and Sweden have corroborated the finding, which activists say puts responsibility for the murder attempt squarely on Moscow. Merkel's government has not ruled out pushing for sanctions from the European Union over the attack.

### FSB link?

With tensions running high, Wednesday's trial will likely be closely scrutinized for details about Moscow's involvement. Investigative website Bellingcat named the suspect as 54-year-old Vadim Krasikov, who grew up in Kazakhstan when it was part of the Soviet Union before moving to the Russian region of Siberia. He received training from Russian intelligence service FSB and was part of its elite squad, the website said. Days before the killing, he had posed as a tourist, visiting sights in Paris including the Eiffel Tower before travelling to Warsaw, according to a separate report in Der Spiegel weekly. He also toured the Polish capital before vanishing on August 22, without checking out from his hotel, the report said. A day later, riding a bicycle in Berlin's Kleiner Tiergarten park, the suspect approached the victim from behind, firing a Glock 26 pistol equipped with a silencer at the side of Tornike K.'s torso, German prosecutors said. After the victim fell to the ground, the accused fired another two shots at his head that killed the Georgian on the spot.

He was seen throwing a bag into the nearby Spree river from where police divers later recovered the Glock handgun, a wig and bicycle. The suspect was arrested after the killing, which took place just minutes



**Hordes of pilgrims in Senegal have begun to converge on the holy city of Touba, ahead of a giant traditional celebration on Tuesday known as the Grand Magal, despite the threat of coronavirus.**

"If your recommendations are followed to the letter, we can hope for a risk-free Magal," local press reported Senegalese President Macky Sall as telling the current Mouride leader in Touba on Monday.

Health Minister Abdoulaye Diouf Sarr—who is due in Touba on Thursday—has also said he was "reassured," adding that he will deploy 5,000 ministry officials to the city. Senegal's Sufi brotherhoods initially cancelled gatherings in March, when the coronavirus pandemic reached the country. —AFP



**BERLIN:** This file photo taken on Aug 23, 2019 shows forensic experts of the police securing evidences at the site of a crime scene in Berlin's Moabit district, where a man of Georgian origin was shot dead. —AFP

away from the chancellery and the German parliament. Investigators later found his mobile phone and a return flight ticket for Moscow in August 25 in his hotel room in Warsaw, Spiegel reported.

Russian President Vladimir Putin had described the victim as a "fighter, very cruel and bloody" who had fought with separatists against Russian forces in the Caucasus and also been involved in bombing attacks on the Moscow metro. Moscow also said it had been seeking his extradition. Named as Zelimkhan Khangoshvili by German media, the victim had survived two assassination attempts in Georgia. Following that, he sought asylum in Germany and had spent the past years in the country. —AFP

Biden is reportedly in relatively good health at 77 he is the oldest Democratic nominee ever. Here is a look at some of the potential scenarios in the event a nominee exits the race:

### Delay the presidential election?

Unlikely. Congress set the date for the election and this one has already been scheduled, as per US law for the Tuesday after the first Monday in November. Both the Republican-controlled Senate and the Democratic-majority House of Representatives would have to agree on a postponement. "I don't see it happening," said Capri Cafaro, a former Democratic member of the Ohio state senate who teaches at American University. "It is unlikely a Democratic majority would want to postpone the elec-

tion." Even during the Civil War between the North and South, the 1864 election was held as scheduled with Abraham Lincoln winning another term.

### Can a candidate be replaced?

Trump's Republican Party and Biden's Democratic Party both have rules outlining how to fill a vacancy on the presidential ticket should one occur. In the case of Trump's GOP, the 168 members of the Republican National Committee could vote to select the replacement.

The RNC could also reconvene its national convention of more than 2,500 delegates to select a new candidate but time pressure probably makes this unworkable. A simple majority would be all that is needed to choose a new

## Ethiopia's Oromo celebrate tense thanksgiving

**BISHOFTU, Ethiopia:** Thousands of people from the Oromo, Ethiopia's largest ethnic group, celebrated their thanksgiving festival in Bishoftu city amid tight security yesterday after the authorities said they had seized weapons and foiled attacks in previous days. The Irreecha festival has been the scene of violent protests before by the Oromo, who have long complained of political exclusion. Recent unrest, including the killing of a popular singer in June and the arrest of prominent Oromo politicians, heightened concern of violence at the two-day festival.

On the eve of the festival, forces from both regional and federal police, as well from the army, descended on Bishoftu in large numbers. There were at least 10 checkpoints by the main lakeside site of the celebrations, and only those with special badges could enter.

"Irreecha has been a platform used by people to express their anger and outrage...that is why this time around they deny people to celebrate this year," said Abdi Fikadu, 26, a health professional.

On the eve of celebrations, police officials in Bishoftu stopped a group of youths at a bar singing and dancing to songs by Haacaaluu Hundeessaa, the musician killed in June, a Reuters witness said. Others were prevented from attending the festival. Dawit Dugama, 25, came all the way from Addis Ababa along with nine friends to take part the festival. They were told they could not join the crowds without a badge. "We were told that we can't be part of the celebration because we don't have badge. This is the government's way to suppress peoples' voices," he said. At the festival in 2016, more than 50 people were killed in a stampede triggered when police used teargas and shot in the air to disperse anti-government protesters.

The festival passed without incident in the capital Addis Ababa on Saturday, again amid very tight security. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed thanked organizers and participants for celebrating peacefully in a Facebook post yesterday.

Police and intelligence services foiled what they said were plans to incite violence in Addis Ababa and other parts of Ethiopia ahead of the festival, state-affiliated Fana Broadcasting reported on Friday.

A day earlier, Oromiya's regional police arrested 503 people on accusations they planned to cause violence during the festival and seized guns and hand grenades. Dressed in traditional white costumes, some wearing masks to prevent the spread of COVID-19, people marched chanting slogans while flashing the Oromo protest gesture. —Reuters

## What happens if a US candidate exits the race?

**WASHINGTON:** A US presidential nominee has never died or had to withdraw from a White House race this close to an election. But President Donald Trump's hospitalization for coronavirus just a month from the November 3 vote has raised the question of what happens if such an event should occur. Trump is 74 years old and while his opponent Joe

candidate in either scenario. In the case of the Democrats, a new presidential nominee would be selected by the nearly 450 members of the Democratic National Committee.

### Can a replacement candidate be on the ballot?

Probably not. "The problem at this point is that we are so far along in this 2020 election that not only have people cast ballots, ballots have already been printed," Cafaro said. "You really don't have enough time to reprint ballots which say Mike Pence or Kamala Harris," she said, referring to the Republican and Democratic vice presidential nominees respectively. More than 3.1 million Americans have already cast their ballots, according to a tally kept by the US Elections Project at the University of Florida. —AFP