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WHO gives nod to China vaccines, boosting drive

Pfizer jab 100% effective on adolescents • Russia registers COVID vaccine for animals



RUSSIA: This handout picture taken on Dec 9, 2020 shows specialists working on the development of a coronavirus vaccine for animals (Carnivak-Cov) at a laboratory of the federal center for animal health. — AFP

GENEVA: Two Chinese coronavirus jabs are safe and effective, WHO experts said yesterday after reviewing partial data, providing a potential boost to countries from Australia to Europe struggling to roll out vaccines fast enough. Fewer than 600 million jabs have been given out across the world, three months after vaccination programs began in earnest in Western countries and leaders hailed the drugs as the only safe way out of punishing lockdowns.

Vaccine specialists at the World Health Organization did not issue any advice on how to use China's jabs, saying they would wait until a decision had been taken on whether to grant them emergency licenses. The experts said the vaccines from Sinovac and Sinopharm "lacked data" for older age groups and people with medical conditions other than COVID.

Another vaccine maker, Pfizer-BioNTech, was pushing ahead with its plans to ramp up production and rollout - saying yesterday new data from the US showed its jab was 100 percent effective on 12 to 15-year-olds. The firm said it wanted to start vaccinating youngsters in the US before the start of the next school year. The US has already rolled out almost 150 million vaccine doses, far more than any other country. But it has also suffered more than 550,000 deaths, the highest death toll in the world. Globally, the virus has killed more than 2.8 million people since it

emerged in the Chinese city of Wuhan in late 2019.

Kuwait registered five deaths and 1,282 new positive cases of COVID-19 in the past 24 hours. Health Ministry Spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said this takes the country's death toll to 1,313, while total cases swelled to 232,103. He added 1,330 more people recovered from the virus, taking total recoveries to 226,580. Sanad revealed 241 people are in intensive care units, while 14,210 others are receiving medical treatment. He pointed out that 9,175 swab tests were conducted in the past 24 hours, taking total tests to 3,056,468.

Large parts of Europe are battling high infection rates, with most of the continent still living under lockdowns or other restrictions. French President Emmanuel Macron, who has repeatedly vowed not to reintroduce a national lockdown, is under increasing pressure. In Paris, intensive care beds are running low and infection rates are approaching last year's peak, pushing medics to breaking point.

The cycle of restrictions and infections is not over in China either, where a city on the Myanmar border faces lockdown - the first such move in months. All residents in the city of Ruili will be tested for the virus and everyone will have to observe "home quarantine" for a week after six cases were detected, say officials.

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Saudi plans fiscal overhaul with \$3.2tn investment

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia announced plans Tuesday to pump investments worth \$3.2 trillion into the national economy by 2030, roping in the oil-reliant kingdom's biggest companies in a major new economic diversification push. The announcement by de facto ruler Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman underscores an effort to jumpstart the domestic economy as the top crude exporter battles high youth unemployment and a coronavirus-triggered downturn.

"The total investment injected... into the national economy is expected to reach 12 trillion riyals (\$3.2 trillion) by 2030," Prince Mohammed said in a speech carried by state television. Twenty-four of the kingdom's biggest companies, including energy giant Aramco and petrochemical firm SABIC, will lead the investment drive by contributing five trillion riyals over the next decade, the crown prince told reporters later at a virtual briefing.

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Biden picks first Muslim as federal judge

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden nominated several black women, an Asian American and the first Muslim ever to federal judgeships Tuesday in a push for diversity in the US court system. Breaking with predecessor Donald Trump's four-year effort to staff federal courts with largely white male conservatives, Biden unveiled his first 11 picks for judges, with only two of them men, neither of them white.

Manousheh leaves tables in Lebanon

BEIRUT: Scattering spinach and hot chili onto fluffy flatbread in Lebanon's capital, 54-year-old Abu Shadi bemoans better times before the economic crisis when all Lebanese could afford his simple meals. The veteran baker is famed for his take on Lebanon's manousheh, a circle of freshly baked dough sprinkled with anything from thyme to meat, then folded in half and rolled in paper to go. But Lebanon's worse financial

crunch in decades has sent prices soaring, and Abu Shadi says many of his customers of three decades can no longer afford even this modest pastry. "Since I started working at this oven in 1987, it's been nothing but goodness and blessings. But today, all that has gone," he said.

On the phone, he warmly receives a stream of orders. He jokes with a customer as he waits for his breakfast, and from inside his shop waves at an acquaintance as they drive by in their car. Looking up from time to time from the flatbreads he heaps with filling, he greets the old and young as they walk by. He hums loudly, only pausing to compliment an elderly lady on her blonde hairstyle.

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Zahid Quraishi

Zahid Quraishi, 45, would become the first ever Muslim to serve as a federal district judge if approved by the Senate. Quraishi is of Pakistani ancestry and currently serves as a magistrate judge in New Jersey. "Judge Quraishi has defended and served our country with distinction in numerous roles - and will make history if confirmed as the first Muslim American federal judge," said New Jersey senator Cory Booker.

At the top of Biden's list was nominating Judge

Ketanji Brown Jackson, who is African-American, to the US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, which is known to handle major cases. If confirmed by the Senate, Jackson, 50, would replace Merrick Garland - who is now Biden's attorney general - and be in a good position to become a candidate for the Supreme Court if a vacancy opens up. No black woman has yet served on the nine-justice high court.

"Ketanji Jackson Brown is one of the best judges in the nation. Brilliant and with deep values. That she is now joining our second highest court is fitting and awesome," tweeted Neal Katyal, a former acting US solicitor general at the Department of Justice. Biden nominated two other African-American women to federal appeals court vacancies.

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Italy expels 2 Russians after spies caught

ROME: Italy expelled two Russian officials yesterday after an Italian navy captain was caught red-handed by police selling secret documents to the Russians. The Italian frigate captain was arrested on spying charges after officers tailing him saw him late Tuesday in Rome in a "clandestine meeting" with a Russian military officer, according to a police statement.

The two men met in a car park, according to media reports. Special operations police stopped them both but arrested only the navy officer, accusing him of passing on "confidential documents" in exchange for money.

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Qatar steps up vaccinations as cases spike

AL WAKRAH, Qatar: Qatar is stepping up its coronavirus vaccination drive, officials said yesterday, with new daily cases almost quadrupling since January and prompting calls for a renewed lockdown. While the coun-

try's death toll per capita is low, almost 5 percent of deaths since the beginning of the pandemic were during the past week, with authorities blaming the more potent British strain.

Medical experts have called for a return to the strict summer lockdown that saw new daily cases plummet from 2,355 at the end of May to 235 by July 31. But Rashid Andaila, a manager at a vaccination point south of Doha, said the vaccine drive was gathering steam, with a second

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BEIRUT: Abu Shadi cuts a freshly baked garnished flatbread before serving it to a customer in his bakery in the Ras Beirut area of the capital on March 27, 2021. — AFP



AL WAKRAH, Qatar: A health worker inoculates a man against the coronavirus at a drive-through vaccination center yesterday. — AFP