

International

Macron gambles by saying 'non' to a third lockdown

Move keeps France on a different path to Britain and Germany

PARIS: French President Emmanuel Macron has gambled by not imposing a third national lockdown to contain COVID-19 — against expectations and the advice of his most senior scientific advisers. The 43-year-old leader opted to tighten existing restrictions on travel and shopping at a cabinet meeting on Friday after a week in which his government appeared to be preparing the public for new stay-at-home orders.

The move keeps France on a different path to its biggest neighbors Britain and Germany at a time when the more contagious UK variant of the disease is spreading rapidly across Europe.

"Everything suggests that a new wave could occur because of the variant, but perhaps we can avoid it thanks to the measures that we decided early and that the French people are respecting," Health Minister Olivier Veran told the *Journal du Dimanche* (JDD) newspaper yesterday. He said that, unlike in other countries, the number of new coronavirus cases had barely increased last week, while other indicators — such as traces of the virus detected in waste water — were also reassuring.

The French government put in place a strict nighttime curfew after a second lockdown ended in December, while deaths of around 250 a day are currently less than a quarter of the number in Britain or Germany.

Macron was reported to have been concerned about the impact of another lockdown on a country struggling with the mental health consequences of nearly a year of restrictions, as well as a deep recession. "Even when the path is narrow, you need to take it," the JDD reported Macron as telling ministers at the meeting on Friday.

"When you're French, you have everything you need to succeed providing you dare to try." Images of anti-lockdown riots in the Netherlands last week are also said to have weighed on his thinking.

But by going against the instincts of health minister Veran and others on his coronavirus scientific council, Macron is taking personal responsibility for a decision with potential to backfire. "Why Macron Said No" read the front-page headline of the JDD, making it clear who should be credited — or blamed — in the future.

Election campaign

Many experts, citing studies since the start of the



French President Emmanuel Macron arrives to welcome Transition Mali President for a working lunch at the Elysee presidential Palace on January 27, 2021 in Paris. — AFP

coronavirus pandemic, argue that early lockdowns are the most effective because they tend to be shorter and reduce the overall economic damage. "The situation is serious, but we think that we have the means to beat what's going to happen. It's worth a try," an unnamed presidential adviser told *Le Monde* newspaper. Another made clear to the same newspaper that another lockdown had not been ruled out, meaning a change in approach was possible.

"If, in the coming days, we witness an incredible increase in the epidemic, then we'll act," the adviser said. At stake, however, is the government's credibility and the clarity of its messaging, just 15 months from a presidential election in which Macron is expected to face off against resurgent far-right leader, Marine Le Pen. As he bids for a second term, the French leader's record on managing the coronavirus crisis — including the lockdowns, economic

support packages and the vaccination campaign — will come under fierce scrutiny.

A poll published yesterday in the JDD showed only 36 percent had confidence in the government's handling, while 64 percent did not. Using an expression first used during the tumultuous inter-war years of France's Third Republic, Le Pen has accused the government of acting "like a dead dog floating along in the water." "We have the feeling of being knocked around without ever anticipating, without ever looking ahead, without ever taking the decisions that allow us to avoid, when it's possible, lockdown number 1, number 2 or number 3," she said last week. But in arguing against lockdowns, it may be that both Macron and Le Pen are out of step with public opinion. A poll yesterday in the JDD, showed that 60 percent would be in favor of a lockdown, but most want schools and non-essential shops to stay open. — AFP

criminology specialists has been formed to identify the victims. Residents of the Guatemalan town of Comitancillo suspect at least a dozen of the victims are their relatives, according to authorities in the Central American country.

Authorities in Tamaulipas, who worked with the neighboring state of Nuevo Leon, established that 113 bullets were fired into a vehicle where the bodies were found. Tamaulipas, on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico, is the shortest route to the United States from Guatemala, but it is dangerous because of the presence of gangs that kidnap, extort, and murder migrants. The region is regularly the scene of clashes between the North West cartel, which controls part of Nuevo Leon, and the Gulf cartel, which has been present in Tamaulipas for decades. Mexico is experiencing a wave of violence linked to organized crime, especially drug cartels that vie for control of the routes to the US.

The rate of violence has grown steadily in the country since the end of 2006, when the government handed the anti-narcotics file to the army. More than 300,000 murders have taken place since that date, according to official figures. Mexico recorded 34,523 murders in 2020, down slightly from 2019, which was a record year since the government began tracking them in 1997. — AFP

Mexico identifies four of 19 bodies found near US border

CIUDAD VICTORIA, Mexico: Mexico has identified at least four of the 19 bodies found shot and burnt near the US border, prosecutors said Saturday. Two Guatemalans-believed to be migrants-and two Mexicans were identified by their DNA after authorities discovered the bodies on January 22, the prosecutor's office in the northern state of Tamaulipas said in a statement.

It said members of the Interior Ministry's national search commission had been added to the investigation for "greater transparency", in collaboration with the foreign ministry and the Guatemalan embassy in Mexico. "It was determined that 16 correspond to the male sex, one to the female sex, and two are pending clarification" due to the severity of the burning, the prosecutors said.

A team of forensics experts, dentists, geneticists and

Pentagon pauses plan to give COVID vaccine to Gitmo detainees

WASHINGTON: The Pentagon said Saturday it was putting on hold a plan to give COVID vaccines to terror detainees at Guantanamo, following an outcry as the United States struggles to deliver jobs to frontline workers and vulnerable elderly Americans. "No Guantanamo detainees have been vaccinated," Pentagon spokesman John Kirby tweeted. "We're pausing the plan to move forward, as we review force protection protocols. We remain committed to our obligations to keep our troops safe."

The Navy base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba houses detainees in the US "war on terror," including top Al-Qaeda figure and alleged 9/11 attack planner Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. The Department of Defense told US media earlier in the week that it would offer vaccines to its detainees and prisoners, to be administered "on a voluntary basis."

Backlash came from Republican lawmakers including the party's top congressman, Kevin McCarthy.

"President Biden told us he would have a plan to defeat the virus on day 1. He just never told us that it would be to give the vaccine to terrorists before most Americans," he said on Twitter. Added New York congresswoman Elise Stefanik: "It is inexcusable and un-American that President Biden is choosing to prioritize vaccinations for convicted terrorists in Gitmo over vulnerable American seniors or veterans."

The United States has been the world's hardest-hit country by the coronavirus pandemic, in absolute terms, with 436,000 deaths and nearly 26 million cases. President Joe Biden has pledged to vaccinate 100 million Americans in his first 100 days in office, but so far the country's mass inoculation drive has been beset by stumbles, including a shortfall in vaccines and widespread technical difficulties for eligible Americans trying to make appointments. According to health officials, the US has so far administered just under 30 million of the nearly 50 million doses distributed in the country. — AFP

News in brief

Germany threatens legal action

BERLIN: Germany's government yesterday threatened legal action against laboratories failing to deliver coronavirus vaccines to the European Union on schedule, amid tension over delays to deliveries from AstraZeneca. "If it turns out that companies have not respected their obligations, we will have to decide the legal consequences," Economy Minister Peter Altmaier told German daily *Die Welt*. "No company can favor another country over the EU after the fact," he added. There has been growing tension in recent weeks between European leaders and the British-Swedish pharmaceutical giant AstraZeneca, which has fallen behind on promised deliveries of its COVID-19 vaccine. — AFP

Mexico tycoon Slim leaves hospital

MEXICO CITY: Mexican telecoms billionaire Carlos Slim, one of the world's richest men, has been discharged from hospital and is doing well after a bout with Covid-19, a source close to his family said Saturday. The 81-year-old tycoon "has been at home since January 28 and is in very good health," the source with the Slim family's Grupo Carso told AFP. On Monday Slim's son, Carlos Slim Domit, announced on Twitter that his father was being treated for Covid-19 and had only mild symptoms. "He's very well. He is making very good progress with Covid-19 after more than a week of minor symptoms," Slim Domit wrote at the time. — AFP

Caution on AstraZeneca jab for over 55s

ROME: Italy's medicines agency on Saturday approved the AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine for all adults but recommended alternatives be given to people aged over 55. AIFA's decision comes a day after the European Union gave the green light for the jab, but Germany's vaccine commission recommended against using it on older people amid questions over its effectiveness that have been rejected by the company. "AIFA authorizes the AstraZeneca vaccine for the prevention of Covid-19 disease in individuals over the age of 18, as per European Medicines Agency guidance," it said. — AFP

Tunisians protest against 'police state'

TUNIS: Hundreds of young people took to the streets of the Tunisian capital on Saturday to protest against police repression and demand the release of demonstrators detained in recent days. The protesters marched from Tunis's central Human Rights Square to Habib Bourguiba Avenue, trying to make their way to the interior ministry, an AFP reporter said, but security forces blocked their path. Denouncing what they say is police repression and government corruption, some demonstrators held signs that read, "Police everywhere, justice nowhere". — AFP

thought was gone is back. It adds up to major change. Yet none of it is remarkable. As late night show host Stephen Colbert quipped about the main difference between Biden's coronavirus plan and Trump's version: "There is one."

It's the virus, stupid

What will happen when Biden's slickly run messaging operation hits harsh reality? To misquote a famous line about the economy from Bill Clinton's presidential campaign, everything now boils down to "the virus, stupid."

COVID-19 is on track to kill half a million Americans. And data Thursday showing the sharpest economic contraction since 1946, with GDP shrinking 3.5 percent in 2020, illustrated the financial impact of all those shuttered restaurants, empty airliners and laid-off workers.

So Biden's presidency could hinge on what happens next. Get Americans vaccinated, then ride the economic revival and Biden could turn disaster into triumph. Fail and he may carry that to the end of his term. "The success of everything else really hinges on that," said Mark Carl Rom, who teaches politics at Georgetown University. With Biden predicting mass vaccinations by summer, Rom says the president will soon face a simple, visible test. Can ordinary people "go to the beach and not worry about getting sick and dying?" Rom asked. "That would be an enormous step." — AFP



An audio statement reportedly from Debretson Gebremichael, president of Tigray, was aired Saturday night via US-based Tigray Media House. — AFP

Ousted Tigray leader breaks long silence

ADDIS ABABA: A Tigrayan media outlet has released a recording of what it said is the ousted leader of Ethiopia's conflict-hit region, in which he issues a fresh call to arms in what would be his first public statement in nearly two months. AFP could not independently verify the authenticity of the audio statement from Debretson Gebremichael which aired Saturday night via US-based Tigray Media House. In November Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed ordered military operations targeting leaders of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the regional ruling party, a move he said came in response to TPLF-orchestrated attacks on federal army camps.

Abiy, winner of the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize, declared victory in late November when federal forces took the Tigray capital Mekele, but Debretson, president of Tigray when the fighting started, has remained on the run. In the Tigray Media House recording of around 20 minutes, Debretson said he was speaking "from Tigrayan land" where "core resistance against invasion is taking place".

"I call upon you, wherever you are... to organize and fight and to strive to make all who have reached fighting age take up the fight, and through this to shorten the lifespan of the enemy," Debretson said.

TPLF leaders were not immediately available for comment, and it was not clear when the recording was made or from where Debretson was speaking. But Kjetil Tronvoll, an expert on the TPLF with deep contacts in the party, said he believed the recording was genuine.

"Though I have not spoken to [Debretson] personally, he has spoken to other contacts of mine in recent days," said Tronvoll, of Bjorknes University College in Norway. Thousands have died in the conflict in Tigray, according to the International Crisis Group, and tens of thousands of refugees have streamed across the border into Sudan. A Mekele-based regional caretaker administration claims life is returning to normal. Yet aid workers and some officials in Tigray have warned of a humanitarian disaster marked by widespread starvation. Media access remains tightly restricted, complicating efforts to confirm conditions on the ground. Abiy's government has dismissed the possibility of the TPLF regrouping to mount an insurgency within Tigray.

In the recording, Debretson acknowledged federal forces' "temporary military dominance" but said this was because of an alliance with outside forces including Eritrean soldiers—something the government denies despite abundant witness accounts to the contrary. Debretson also noted that some TPLF leaders "have paid and are continuing to pay the ultimate sacrifice." — AFP



WASHINGTON, DC: US President Joe Biden spends the weekend at the White House Saturday in Washington, DC. Biden met with advisors for the next steps on COVID response measures and an economic relief package. — AFP