

International

Flowers, hope and consent forms for India's huge vaccine rollout

India aims to vaccinate around 300m of its 1.3bn people by July

NEW DELHI: Hospitals were decked out with flowers and one politician planted a tree as India began yesterday its colossal coronavirus vaccine drive, desperately hoping to end a pandemic that has killed 150,000 of its people. India aims to vaccinate around 300 million of its 1.3 billion people by July—a number equal to almost the entire US population—with frontline workers, people over 50 and those deemed high risk first in line.

On day one around 300,000 people were due to be vaccinated with Covishield, developed by AstraZeneca and made by India's Serum Institute, or the homegrown Covaxin.

Covaxin is still in clinical trials and recipients yesterday had to sign a consent form that stated that the "clinical efficacy... is yet to be established". But Prime Minister Narendra Modi as he launched the vaccination program urged people to reject "propaganda and rumors" about the indigenous vaccine.

"The world has immense faith in India's scientists and capacity of vaccine production," Modi, 70, said in a video message.

'Ray of hope'

Inside a 15,000-bed field hospital in Mumbai, authorities set up 15 vaccination booths and expected to inoculate up to 1,000 people yesterday. "Back in May, it felt like a losing battle. We were getting 200 cases a day," said Rajesh C. Dere, 46, the dean. "Today I feel a great sense of satisfaction that we have succeeded."

The facility's first recipient was a young female health worker in lab coat and mask. There was applause as she got the jab in her right arm and

gave a thumbs-up with her left. Mohan Ganpat Nikam, 53, a security guard at another Mumbai hospital, said he was scared last year as the pandemic raged through the country.

"I felt so happy when I heard that my name was on the list for vaccinations," he said.

Physiotherapist Smita Ringanekar, 42, said she spent months living in a hotel so she could help patients and not infect her aged parents at home. "I haven't visited any of my friends or relatives for months," she said. "I have seen people dying," said health worker Santa Roy, 35 in the eastern city of Kolkata, saying he now saw a "ray of hope".

Ram Babu, the first recipient in Patna, said he went to the temple on the way to the hospital, and was "so excited that I couldn't sleep."

'Deeply challenging'

New infection rates in India have fallen sharply in recent months. On Friday 175 people died compared to almost 4,000 a day earlier in the United States. But experts are concerned a new wave might hit, fuelled by a string of recent mass religious festivals. Authorities are drawing on their experience with India's massive elections and child immunization programs for polio and tuberculosis. But in an enormous, impoverished nation with often shoddy transport networks and one of the world's worst-funded healthcare systems, it is still a daunting undertaking. Child inoculations are a "much smaller game" and vaccinating against Covid-19 is "deeply challenging", said Satyajit Rath from the National Institute of Immunology.

Both approved vaccines need to be kept refrigerated, and others being developed will need to be



MUMBAI: Nurses from the Rajawadi Hospital make the victory sign gesture as they pose in front of a television broadcasting live address by India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi before the start of the COVID-19 vaccination drive in Mumbai yesterday. — AFP

stored at ultra-low temperatures—and in a country with scorching summers. There are also concerns about plans to manage the entire process digitally via India's own app, CoWIN—of which there are already several fake versions.

Fake news

And as in other countries, there is skepticism about the vaccine, fuelled by a torrent of hoaxes and baseless rumors online about the virus. For example, multiple Facebook and Twitter posts

shared hundreds of times—debunked by AFP Fact Check—claimed no vegetarian had died from COVID. A recent survey of 18,000 people across India found that 69 percent were in no rush to get a COVID-19 jab. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the approval of Covaxin without data from phase 3 human trials has further eroded trust among doctors and patients alike. But with "Thank you Modi" posters on the wall, Chand Wattal, 60, a senior Delhi doctor who was among the first to be vaccinated—with Covishield—wasn't worried. — AFP

Hunt for buried survivors after Indonesia quake

MAMUJU, Indonesia: Rescuers scrambled to find buried survivors yesterday after a powerful earthquake on Indonesia's Sulawesi Island killed dozens, injured hundreds and left more feared trapped in the rubble of collapsed buildings, as monsoon rains lashed the disaster-struck region. At least 46 people died after the 6.2-magnitude quake struck in the early hours of Friday, triggering panic among residents of the island, which was hit by a 2018 quake-tsunami disaster that killed thousands. Search-and-rescue worked through the night as they pulled dozens of bodies from beneath crumpled buildings in Mamuju, a city of about 110,000 people in West Sulawesi province, where a hospital was flattened and a shopping mall lay in ruins.

Others were killed south of the city

after the quake struck, as a strong aftershock jolted the area yesterday morning. Grieving relatives began burying the dead at a local cemetery. Planes and boats packed with food and other emergency supplies were arriving, with the navy reportedly sending a ship equipped with mobile medical services as Mamuju's still-standing hospitals were flooded with hundreds of injured. Rescuers said a shortage of heavy equipment was slowing the search effort, while thousands left homeless by the quake set up makeshift shelters on higher ground—many little more than tarpaulin-covered tents that were lashed by heavy downpours.

"We're running out of food. There hasn't been any aid from the government yet," 24-year-old survivor Desti told AFP from hard-hit Majene, adding that some survivors at the camp needed medical attention. "Some people are using coconut leaves as mats," she added. Many survivors are unable to return to their destroyed homes, or too scared to go back fearing more quakes or a tsunami, said Desti, who like many



MAMUJU: Rescuers move the body of a victim that was trapped in a collapsed building in Mamuju yesterday. — AFP

Indonesians goes by one name. Authorities have not given a figure for the number of residents who could still be trapped under buildings reduced to twisted metal and concrete chunks, including the hospital that collapsed with more than a dozen patients and staff inside.

Yesterday, authorities said they

had pulled eight corpses from under the building, while five members of a family of eight were found dead in the crumpled remains of their home. Among the Mamuju survivors was a pair of young sisters plucked from under the mass of concrete and other debris. The pair are now being treated in hospital. — AFP

Iceland leads the way in COVID sequencing

REYKJAVIK, Iceland: Iceland has genetically sequenced all its positive COVID-19 cases since the start of the pandemic, an increasingly vital practice as worrying new strains emerge from Britain and South Africa. The World Health Organization on Friday urged all countries to ramp up genome sequencing to help combat the emerging variants. Scientists at the Icelandic biopharma group deCODE Genetics' laboratory in Reykjavik have worked relentlessly for the past 10 months, analyzing each positive coronavirus test in Iceland at the request of the country's health authorities. The aim is to trace every case in order to prevent problematic ones from slipping through the net. "It takes us relatively short time to do the actual sequencing," explains the head of the lab, Olafur Thor

Magnusson, adding that "about three hours" is all that is needed to determine the virus strain.

The entire process, from isolating the DNA to sequencing it, can take up to a day and a half, and has enabled Iceland to identify 463 separate variants—which scientists call haplotypes. Prior to sequencing, the DNA of each sample is first isolated, then purified using magnetic beads. The samples are then taken to a massive, bright room full of equipment, where a deafening sound emanates from small machines resembling scanners. The machines are gene sequencers which map the novel coronavirus genome.

World leader

Inside each machine is a black box called a "flow cell", a glass slide that contains the DNA molecules. This technology has played a large role in Iceland since the start of the pandemic. "The sequencing of samples is key to helping us follow the state and development of the epidemic," Health Minister Svandis Svavarsdottir told AFP. Authorities have used the sequencing information to decide on precise, targeted measures to curb the spread of the virus, she



REYKJAVIK: In this file photo Scientists at deCODE genetics are seen working in the laboratory in Reykjavik, Iceland. — AFP

said. While the South African variant has not been detected in Iceland, 41 people have been identified as carriers of the British variant. All of them were stopped at the border—where PCR tests are conducted on travellers—effectively preventing the variant's transmission on the subarctic island. — AFP

Taliban kill 12 militiamen in Afghanistan

HERAT, Afghanistan: Two Taliban fighters who had infiltrated a base of pro-government Afghan militiamen killed 12 of them, officials and the insurgent group said yesterday. The night-time attack at a post manned by the militiamen occurred in the district of Ghorian in the western Herat province late on Friday, the governor for the district Farhad Khademi told AFP.

"Twelve pro-government militiamen were killed in the Taliban attack in Ghorian district last night," he said. Herat provincial council member Mohammad Sardar Bahaduri confirmed the attack and said it was carried out by two Taliban fighters who had infiltrated the base. "The militiamen were dining when the attack happened," he

said. The Taliban also said two of its fighters had carried out the attack and then returned. In a separate incident, a vehicle carrying policemen was struck by a roadside bomb in the center of the Afghan capital Kabul, police spokesman Ferdaws Faramarz told reporters. Two policemen were killed and one wounded in the attack, he said.

Violence has surged across Afghanistan in recent months, especially in Kabul, which has been rocked by a new trend of targeted killings. The bloodshed comes even as the Taliban and government negotiators engage in peace talks to end the nearly two-decades-long war in the country. Representatives from two warring sides are currently in the Qatari capital Doha discussing the agenda for the talks.

US troop withdrawal

The Taliban welcomed the latest withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan with the insurgents' spokesman yesterday calling the continued reduction of American forces a

"good advancement" even as fighting raged across the war-weary country. The Taliban's statement came just hours after the Pentagon announced it had cut troop levels in Afghanistan to 2,500, their lowest numbers during the nearly two decades of fighting. Washington struck a deal with the Taliban in Qatar last year to begin withdrawing its troops in return for security guarantees from the militants and a commitment to peace talks with Kabul.

Those talks are ongoing, but have stalled amid violence and allegations of slow progress. Meanwhile the Taliban has continued its lethal assaults on Afghan security forces and civilians alike. "The withdrawal of other US forces from Afghanistan, which was announced by the US yesterday, is a good advancement and practical measure," tweeted Taliban spokesman Mohammad Naeem. "Undoubtedly, the practice of the agreement signed between the IEA and the US is in the benefit of both countries and nations," he added, referring to the Taliban's official acronym. — AFP

Australian bushfire threatens Perth homes

SYDNEY: Australian firefighters said they expect to battle an out-of-control bushfire well into the night yesterday, as the blaze threatens lives and homes in the west coast city of Perth. Residents were told "to act immediately to survive" as the flames approached homes near Oakford, about 35 kilometers (22 miles) south of Perth's city center, in an emergency warning issued by the Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES). Locals were told to evacuate if the way was clear or to take shelter, as the fire spewed thick smoke over the area. Around 150 firefighters were expected to work overnight into Sunday to bring the 80-100 hectare (200-250 acre) blaze under control, DFES District Officer Russell Wells told media. "There are certainly some challenging conditions ahead," Wells said.

Although temperatures were expected to dip overnight from their high of 33 degrees Celsius (91 Fahrenheit), strong gusty winds were forecast. And crews were expecting even hotter temperatures on Sunday amid concerns the windy conditions could cause the fire to double in size. "What we're really trying to do at the moment is bring this fire under control today and have a really strong presence tomorrow so it doesn't flare up," said Wells. Aerial footage showed at least one structure ablaze in the area as water bombing aircraft repeatedly tried to douse the fire. Several roads have been closed and evacuation centers set up.

There were also several other wildfires burning around the edges of the city. Western Australia was spared the brunt of last summer's devastating climate change-fueled wildfires, which mostly ravaged the country's two most populous states, New South Wales and Victoria. The fires razed more than 24 million hectares (49 million acres) of drought-stricken bushland and forest across Australia in late 2019 and early 2020, killing more than 30 people and destroying thousands of homes. — AFP

News in brief

Serbia gets Sinopharm jabs

BELGRADE: Serbia became one of the first European countries to receive a Chinese-made COVID-19 vaccine yesterday when one million doses of a jab produced by Sinopharm arrived at Belgrade airport. President Aleksandar Vucic posted a picture of himself on Instagram, standing next to the plane carrying the vaccine. "We are proud of our friendship with China," he was quoted as saying by Beta news agency, telling reporters that he hoped to be inoculated with the Sinopharm vaccine in six or seven days. — AFP

World migration down 30%

UNITED NATIONS: The coronavirus pandemic has slowed global migration by nearly 30 percent, with around two million fewer people than predicted migrating between 2019 and 2020, according to a UN report released on Friday. Some 281 million people were living outside their country of origin in 2020. The report, entitled "International Migration 2020," showed that two-thirds of registered migrants lived in just 20 countries, with the United States at the top of the list, with 51 million international migrants in 2020. Next came Germany with 16 million, Saudi Arabia with 13 million, Russia with 12 million and Britain with nine million. — AFP

UN peacekeeper killed

BANGUI: A Burundian peacekeeper was killed Friday during an ambush by rebels in the Central African Republic, the United Nations said, the fifth soldier killed since a rebel offensive began. The soldier died in an ambush by a coalition of rebels near Grimari, roughly 300 kilometers northeast of the capital Bangui, the UN said, during a security mission to the town with Burundian and Bangladeshi peacekeepers. MINUSCA—the UN peacekeeping force in the region—also said that two Bangladeshi soldiers were lightly wounded. In a statement from New York, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres strongly condemned the attack and reiterated his "deep concern over the continued destabilization efforts by armed groups throughout the country." — AFP