

International

High-profile breakthrough cases trigger vaccine misinformation

A fully vaccinated public figure catches COVID-19

News in brief

'Death threats to MP'

LONDON: Irish police said Saturday they had arrested a man on suspicion of making threats, with national media reporting he was suspected of threatening to kill a British MP. The arrest came after Conservative MP David Amess was stabbed to death last month, prompting concerns over the level of threat faced by politicians and calls for better security. The Garda, Ireland's police service, said in a statement that they arrested a 41-year-old man in Cork in southwestern Ireland on Saturday morning "on suspicion of making threats against a person from outside this jurisdiction". Irish police said officers seized a number of electronic devices while searching the residential property. RTE national broadcaster reported that "it is understood that the person targeted by the alleged threat is a Westminster MP". — AFP

Russia hit by record cases

MOSCOW: Russia has reported a record number of daily coronavirus cases as the country reaches the end of a nationwide paid holiday introduced to curb the spread of infections. Saturday's official tally registered 41,335 new cases in the past 24 hours, the highest number for new infections since the beginning of the pandemic. The country also reported 1,188 coronavirus deaths during the same period. President Vladimir Putin last month ordered a paid holiday from October 30 to November 7 in a bid to stem soaring infections and deaths exacerbated by a slow vaccination drive. A host of regions also introduced additional virus measures with the capital Moscow - the epicenter of Russia's outbreak - closing all non-essential services over the non-working period. — AFP

Mexico highway accident

MEXICO CITY: At least 19 people were killed and three injured Saturday in an accident on the highway that connects Mexico City with the central city of Puebla, authorities said. The crash occurred at midday when a cargo truck crashed into several vehicles at a toll booth on the highway. Some of the vehicles caught fire after the impact. "When crossing the toll booth, the truck dragged six vehicles, causing the death of 19 people and 3 injured. Among the deceased is the driver," the federal highway authority, CAPUFE, said in a statement. Those injured had been transferred to hospital, the statement said. CAPUFE also said it was working to remove the vehicles involved in the accident. That section of the highway had been closed to traffic. — AFP

21 scientists snub medals

BRASILIA: Twenty-one scientists awarded one of Brazil's highest honors, the National Order of Scientific Merit, rejected their medals Saturday after President Jair Bolsonaro withdrew two colleagues whose work apparently discomfited his government from the list of honorees. The far-right president named 25 people Wednesday to receive the honor, which Brazil created in 1992 to recognize the most important contributions to science and technology. However, two days later, he withdrew the names of two prominent scientists from the list. One was Dr Marcus Lacerda, who published one of the first studies finding the drug chloroquine is ineffective against COVID-19 - rebutting Bolsonaro's pet strategy for fighting the pandemic. — AFP

Lagos death toll hits 42

LAGOS: The death toll in a high-rise collapse in Nigeria's Lagos has risen to 42 while the number of survivors increased to 15, state authorities have announced. The cause of Monday's disaster is still unknown but building collapses are common in Africa's most populous country, where millions live in dilapidated properties and construction standards are routinely ignored. "We have a total of 42 bodies that have been recovered," Governor Babajide Sanwo-Olu said late on Saturday. The 21-storey building under construction in the upscale Ikoyi district crumbled on Monday afternoon, trapping dozens of people working on the site. As of Friday, the authorities had said that nine people had survived - some were rescued alive, others on the ground floor managed to escape unharmed. Over the weekend, the number of survivors increased to 15 after six additional people who escaped the collapse were identified. — AFP

WASHINGTON: The problem is persistent: a fully vaccinated public figure catches COVID-19, and social media sites are soon flooded with claims that this proves the shots do not work. From White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki, US Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, and American comedian Chris Rock testing positive to former secretary of state Colin Powell dying of COVID-19 complications, prominent cases have triggered a deluge of inaccurate information online.

So-called breakthrough cases are expected and do not mean the vaccines are ineffective, US health authorities say. But claims that the shots are failing can erode trust and slow uptake efforts, which remain crucial as younger children become eligible for the shots. "Any time there is a breakthrough case, people who feel very concerned about the efficacy of vaccines see it as yet another reason to reinforce the doubt that's already in their mind," said Andy Carvin, managing editor at the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab, describing the problem as a "weaponization of doubt."

Psaki announced on Sunday that she had COVID-19, crediting the vaccine for the mildness of her illness. But she was described as "living proof that the vaccine is ineffective" by a Twitter user with more than 12,000 followers - one of a number of people who made such claims on social media. Similar allegations followed the Powell fami-

ly's October announcement that the retired four-star general died from complications caused by COVID-19, even though he had a type of cancer that experts say undermines the efficacy of the shots. Positive tests for Kavanaugh and Rock this year also gave rise to accusations that the shots are not effective.

Not 'a magic forcefield'

Addressing the issue of misinformation stemming from breakthrough cases is increasingly important, because as more people get vaccinated, more cases - including severe ones - will occur in the vaccinated population, said Devon Greyson, public health researcher at The University of British Columbia. "Vaccination is an amazing technology, but it isn't a magic forcefield," Greyson said.

Yotam Ophir, health and science misinformation expert at the University at Buffalo, State University of New York, said that health communicators need to better set public expectations about the realities of the vaccines, both in terms of their benefits and their limits. The other issue is that "humans have a tendency to pay a lot of attention to vivid cases. We don't really know how to think in numbers and statistics, we usually think in stories and good narratives," he said. What is not covered by the news is "all the people who got vaccinated and stayed healthy," Ophir said.

Nina Jankowicz, a disinformation specialist at the



Social media sites flooded with claims

Glitches hit Nigeria southeast election

ANAMBRA: Technical problems hit a governorship election in Nigeria's southeastern state of Anambra on Saturday during a vote seen as a test of the electoral system less than 18 months before presidential polls. More than 30,000 police were dispatched to secure Anambra after a string of attacks in the southeast blamed on separatists from the Indigenous People of Biafra or IPOB who agitate for an independent state for the ethnic Igbo people.

The vote went ahead peacefully, but some polling stations in the capital Awka and outside in rural areas reported problems with the face and fingerprint recognition technology meant to better secure the ballot. The Independent National Electoral Commission or INEC said in a statement it had extended voting initially by a few hours and until yesterday or

beyond in some cases to make sure eligible voters could cast their ballot.

"The Commission is currently investigating the reason the accreditation devices... have worked perfectly in some polling stations and not in others," a statement said on INEC's Facebook page. "In some of the cases, it would seem that this resulted from software glitches." INEC said in cases where the problem was sustained, then voting would continue or at another time determined by the commission.

At three polling stations visited by AFP south of Awka on Saturday morning, voters were either unable to cast their vote because of a failure of the accreditation technology or voting was slowed significantly, according to domestic observers. Early election results were not due until today. Elections in Africa's most populous state are often marred by fraud claims and violence, and analysts saw Anambra's ballot and voter turnout as one barometer of confidence in INEC's readiness for the ballot to replace President Muhammadu Buhari in 2023.

The election developed into a tight race between Charles Chukwuma Soludo, with local powerhouse party All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA),

Italy mobsters get decades in jail in major mafia trial

ROME: Italy struck an early blow Saturday against the country's powerful 'Ndrangheta organized crime group, convicting 70 mobsters and others in a first, crucial test of the largest mafia trial in more than three decades. Judge Claudio Paris read out verdicts and sentences against 91 defendants in the massive courtroom in the Calabrian city of Lamezia Terme. While 355 people have yet to be judged in proceedings that are expected to last two years or longer, those judged Saturday had opted for a speedy trial. That procedure, which took place behind closed doors, allowed them to have a third of their sentence shaved off if they were convicted.

Since January, a specially adapted courtroom has hosted the "maxi trial" of hundreds of suspects affiliated with the 'Ndrangheta, the country's richest and most powerful mafia group. Famed anti-mafia prosecutor Nicola Gratteri -

whose efforts to defeat the 'Ndrangheta have caused him to live under police escort for more than 30 years - said the sentencing had gone "very well". "Out of 91 defendants, there were 70 presumed innocent who were convicted," Gratteri told Italian news agency AdnKronos, adding that those acquitted had been minor players.

Some of the group's most dangerous members received the maximum 20-year sentence requested by prosecutors. They included Domenico Macri of the group's military wing; Pasquale Gallone, the right-hand man of alleged mob boss Luigi Mancuso, whose trial is still pending; and Gregorio Niglia, whose role included procuring weapons and extortion. About a third of the group received sentences of a decade or more, while 21 individuals were acquitted, seven at the request of prosecutors, Gratteri said.

The 'Ndrangheta, which is

Changing guard at Buckingham Palace: Camilla steps up

LONDON: A gradual changing of the guard is happening at the head of Britain's royal family, as Queen Elizabeth II steps back from public engagements due to her advanced age and health. The 95-year-old monarch's eldest son and heir, Charles, Prince of Wales, has been shouldering more of the burden of official duties for several years, including overseas. But his wife, Camilla, is increasingly stepping into the fray, both online during coronavirus pandemic restrictions in the past year and now in

person, after curbs were lifted.

Joining the couple at the royal vanguard are Charles' eldest son from his first marriage to Princess Diana, William, and his wife, Kate. As a result, they have earned a greater share of the media coverage that would previously have gone to the monarch, who has been advised to rest by doctors. Their presence at events - from the world premiere of the latest James Bond film to meeting world leaders at the G7 and UN climate summits - is a clear sign of change to come. Joe Little, managing editor of Majesty Magazine, told AFP their visibility "will accelerate within the fullness of time". "But a lot of people are now familiar with Camilla and are getting to know her," he added.

Camilla, 74, also known as the Duchess of Cornwall, will become consort when Charles, 72, takes the throne. William, 39, will move up the line



WASHINGTON: White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki arrives for the daily press briefing in the Brady Briefing Room of the White House in Washington, DC. White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said that she has tested positive for COVID-19. — AFP

Wilson Center, said false claims following Powell's death were "especially disappointing," because a lack of nuance in the media allowed misinformation to bloom. "A lot of the coverage that I saw, even from some of the most trusted news outlets in our country... didn't include information about Secretary Powell's cancer status," she said. Carvin said the necessity of context in news coverage is at odds with the breakneck speed and need for brevity in the current media environment. — AFP



ISUOFIA, Nigeria: An electoral official accredits a woman to vote at a polling station during the Anambra State governorship election at Uga, Aguata district in southeast Nigeria. — AFP

and the candidates from Buhari's ruling All Progressives Congress (APC) party and the main opposition People's Democratic Party (PDP).

Security fears were heightened when IPOB had called for a sit-in protest over the election period to demand the release of its arrested

leader. But IPOB on Thursday cancelled its protest and urged people to go out and vote. "People came out and voted and it was peaceful," said agricultural consultant Venentius Oneyekuba who voted in an Awka district. "There were some network problems but later it stabilized." — AFP



LAMEZIA: A Carabinieri police officer wearing a face mask stands guard as a general view shows a special courtroom on the opening day of the 'Rinascita-Scott' maxi-trial in which more than 350 alleged members of Calabria's 'Ndrangheta mafia group and their associates go on trial in Lamezia Terme, Calabria. — AFP

entrenched in Italy's poorest region of Calabria in the toe of the peninsula's boot, has surpassed Sicily's Cosa Nostra in power and wealth. The group controls the bulk of cocaine flowing into Europe. The biggest fish in the prosecution's case have opted for the

more lengthy trial, namely Mancuso "The Uncle", 67, considered the leader of the 'Ndrangheta families who dominated the Vibo Valentia province of Calabria, and ex-senator and lawyer Giancarlo Pittelli, 68, accused of being Mancuso's white-collar fixer. — AFP

of succession to heir apparent. Only a few years ago, a different "Fab Four" were seen as the future of Britain's most famous family: William and Kate along with his younger brother Harry and his wife Meghan. But plans changed dramatically last year when Harry and Meghan moved to the United States, from where they have criticized the family and even accused it of racism.

The rise of Camilla - once a hate-figure for being "the other woman" in Charles and Diana's marriage - has been remarkable. "Her position has certainly evolved and there's been a huge and very long process of rehabilitation since... she was described as this rottweiler at the time of Diana," royal historian Anna Whitelock told the Daily Express. Camilla, like other royals, was forced into a more public role by the coronavirus pandemic, when the world moved online. — AFP