

International

Political row snags German bid to tame COVID-19 surge

Authorities plan to impose tougher curbs on unvaccinated

BERLIN: German leaders were debating yesterday plans to impose tougher curbs on the unvaccinated, but a political row threatened to torpedo the country's bid to fight a ferocious wave of the coronavirus pandemic. New infections over the last 24 hours soared to another record of 65,371, data from the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) showed, part of a spike Chancellor Angela Merkel has called "dramatic".

The outgoing chancellor is due to meet leaders of Germany's 16 states later to decide new measures to tame the surge. On the table is tough action including requirements on those not immunised to provide negative tests in order to use public transport or go to the office. But hours ahead of the crunch talks, a heated row broke out in the lower house of parliament, where MPs were to vote on a bill providing the legal framework for Merkel and regional leaders to deploy those measures.

The three political parties in talks to form Germany's next government drew up a new draft law to replace ongoing legislation set to expire on November 25. But Merkel's conservative CDU-CSU bloc says the new bill is weaker than the incumbent law, and has threatened to defeat it on Friday at the upper house of parliament. Germany's likely next coalition of Social Democrats, Greens and liberal FDP "is making their first decision today and also their first mistake," accused Stephan Stracke of Merkel's conservatives. "They have no plan for this pandemic and

how one can counter it."

The three parties in turn hit back at Merkel's conservatives for failing to do enough while in government. The political tangle threatens to hold up the fight against the pandemic at a time when hospital intensive care beds are filling up rapidly. It also marks a huge setback for the next likely government, known as the "traffic light" coalition after their party colors. The gridlock could be a harbinger for an increasingly hamstrung Germany in the coming years with the two parliamentary houses pitted against each other.

'Very bad Christmas'

Accused of inaction in the last weeks as Germany's infections rebounded sharply, the incoming likely coalition scrambled to come up with new proposals to fight the virus. It wants to shut out the unimmunized from indoor cultural events, sport activities as well as restaurants and bars.

But critics say its strategy removes the possibility for far-reaching shutdowns including school closures which Germany deployed a year ago. Merkel's conservatives say such measures may well be necessary in states like Saxony or Bavaria, where infection rates are among the highest in the country. Health Minister Jens Spahn, himself from the CDU, admitted that he "wished that the states had more possibilities to react" to the surge. RKI chief Robert Wieler, one of the country's top immunologists, said rapid



BERLIN: German Chancellor Angela Merkel walks into the Reichstag building to attend a session at the Bundestag, the lower house of parliament, yesterday in Berlin, where the parliament is to examine proposed new COVID-related restrictions. — AFP

action was essential.

Voicing frustration at the political stalemate, he said: "We don't have to keep inventing something new. All the ideas and prescriptions we need are available. "After 21 months, I simply can't stand it that what I'm saying and what other colleagues are saying is still not being ac-

cepted," he said. Wieler warned that the actual number of infections may be up to three times higher than official data indicate as many infections go undetected or untested. "We are currently in a serious emergency. We will really have a very bad Christmas if we don't change course now," he said. — AFP

Clashes rock Sudan capital after deadliest day since coup

KHARTOUM, Sudan: Street clashes again shook Sudan's capital yesterday a day after security forces shot dead 15 protesters in the bloodiest day since the military's October 25 takeover. Police fired tear gas to disperse dozens of anti-coup protesters who had stayed on the streets of north Khartoum overnight, braving an intensifying crackdown that has drawn international condemnation, witnesses said.

Police tore down makeshift barricades the protesters had erected the previous day. Later in the day, dozens of protesters returned to rebuild them and police again fired tear gas in a bid to clear the streets, witnesses said.

"Protesters responded by hurling stones at the police," one witness said. On October 25, top general Abdel Fattah al-Burhan-Sudan's de facto leader since the April 2019 ouster of longtime president Omar al-Bashir—detained the civilian leadership and declared a state of emergency.

The move upended Sudan's fragile transition to full civilian rule, drawing international condemnation and a flurry of punitive measures and aid cuts. "We condemn violence towards peaceful protesters and call for the respect and protection of human rights in Sudan," the US State Department's Bureau of African Affairs said on Twitter.

UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Association Clement

Voule said he had "received alarming reports of increased use of lethal force by the military against peaceful protesters". He called on the international community to "put pressure on Sudan to immediately stop the repression against civilians and respect their rights". Burhan insists the military's move "was not a coup" but a step to "rectify the course of the transition" to civilian rule. Thousands took to the streets on Wednesday in Khartoum and other cities but were met by the deadliest crackdown since the coup.

At least 15 people were killed, most of them in north Khartoum, medics said, raising the toll since the coup to 39. Police said they had recorded only one death among protesters in north Khartoum. Another 30 had suffered breathing difficulties from tear gas inhalation. They said they had fired no live rounds and used only "minimum force", even as 89 officers were wounded, some of them critically.

Phones, internet cut

The latest demonstrations were organised despite a near-total shutdown of internet services and the disruption of telephone lines across Sudan. By yesterday morning, phone lines had been restored but internet services remained largely cut.

Bridges connecting Khartoum with its neighbouring cities reopened and traffic returned to many of the capital's streets. AFP correspondents saw security forces removing barricades from some streets in north and east Khartoum.

Last week, Burhan formed a new Sovereign Council, the highest transitional authority, with himself as chief and military figures and ex-rebel leaders keeping their posts. He replaced members from the Forces for Freedom and Change, Sudan's main civilian bloc, with little-known figures. — AFP

Death toll from Nigeria attacks rises to 43

ABUJA: The death toll from separate attacks this week by heavily armed gunmen on two towns in northwest Nigeria has risen to 43, the local state government said.

Criminal gangs known locally as bandits have plagued northwest and central Nigeria for years, raiding and looting villages, but attacks have intensified in recent months along with a spate of mass kidnappings. Dozens of gunmen stormed into Sokoto's Illela and Goronyo towns early Monday, with the initial reports saying 15 residents had been killed.

Sokoto State Governor Aminu Waziri Tambuwal's office said in statement late Wednesday that toll had risen to 43. "This is not a small occurrence. It is upsetting," the governor said on a visit to Illela, according to the statement. "This incident really touched us." Since September, Nigerian troops have been carrying out offensives on bandit camps in neighbouring Zamfara state.

To disrupt communication between gang members, telecom services were shut down in Zamfara and parts of Kaduna, Katsina and Sokoto states. Bandits escaping military operations in Zamfara have set up camps near the border with Niger, including in Sokoto, from where they launch attacks on local villages and towns. Last month bandits opened fire on a market in Goronyo, killing 43 traders. — AFP