

## International

# Philippines eyes clinical trials for Russian COVID-19 vaccine

## Brazil state signs deal to make Russian vaccine

**MANILA:** The Philippines plans to launch clinical trials for a Russian coronavirus vaccine in October, with President Rodrigo Duterte expected to be inoculated as early as May next year, the presidential spokesman said yesterday. Harry Roque, Duterte's spokesman, made the announcement a day after Philippine scientists met with representatives of the vaccine developer, research facility Gamaleya, to discuss trials and information about the inoculation.

Russia on Tuesday became the world's first country to grant regulatory approval for a COVID-19 vaccine, to be named "Sputnik V" in homage to the Soviet Union's launch of the world's first satellite. But its decision to grant approval before completing trials has raised concerns among some experts, who fear it may be putting national prestige before safety.

Health Undersecretary Maria Rosario Vergeire said that all clinical trials would need to go through the regulatory process. Phase three clinical trials in the Philippines are due to run from October to March 2021, after a panel of vaccine experts completes its review on Russia's phase one and two trials in September, Roque told a media briefing. Duterte is keen to access a vaccine and in July made a plea to China to make the Philippines a priority if it develops one.

The president has pledged that the Philippines, which suffered its biggest economic contraction in nearly three decades, would be "back to normal" by December even as it has been reporting record numbers of daily coronavirus in-

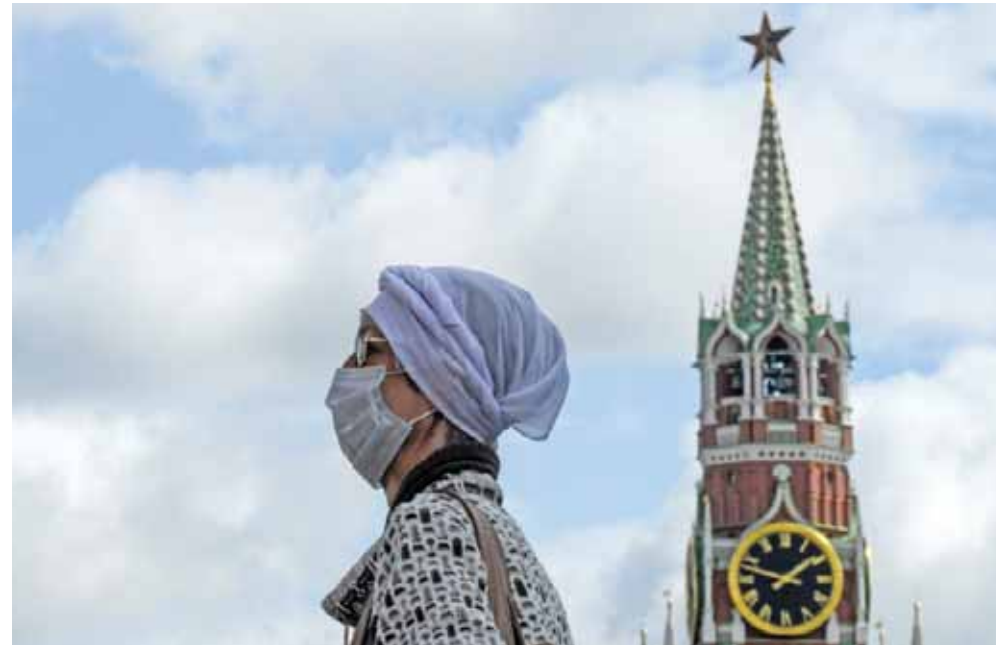
fections since July. The novel coronavirus has infected more than 143,000 people and killed 2,404 in the Philippines. A strict coronavirus lockdown recently reintroduced in and around the capital Manila is unlikely to be extended beyond August 18, the presidential spokesman said.

### Brazil state signs deal

In another development, the Brazilian state of Parana signed a deal Wednesday to test and produce Russia's new coronavirus vaccine, though officials stressed they would have to be sure of its safety and effectiveness first. The vaccine would have to receive Brazilian regulatory approval and complete Phase 3 clinical trials, or large-scale testing in humans, before being produced in Brazil, said officials from the southern state. Production, if it goes ahead, would likely only start in the second half of 2021, said Jorge Callado, head of the state-run Parana Technology Institute, which signed the deal with the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF).

"This is a very objective memorandum of understanding on technological exchange. It does not impose obligations, it simply enables us to work together," he told a virtual news conference. He said that under the deal Russia would share the results of Phase 1 and 2 testing with the state. President Vladimir Putin announced Tuesday that Russia had approved the vaccine, dubbed "Sputnik V," in a world first, heralding it as a game-changer in the pandemic.

But international health officials have cautioned more testing and scrutiny are needed to



**MOSCOW:** A woman wearing a face mask to protect against the coronavirus disease walks in front of the Kremlin's Spasskaya tower on Red Square in downtown Moscow. — AFP

ensure it is safe and effective. Brazil has become a popular testing ground for COVID-19 vaccines, since the new coronavirus is still spreading quickly there.

The country has the second-highest number of infections and deaths in the pandemic, after

the United States: more than 3.1 million and 104,000, respectively. Two experimental vaccines are currently in Phase 3 testing in Brazil, one developed by Oxford University with pharmaceutical firm AstraZeneca and the other by Chinese laboratory Sinovac Biotech. — Agencies

## Netherlands' Belgian enclave juggles tricky coronavirus rules

**BAARLE-NASSAU:** There is a small Belgian enclave in the southern Netherlands where respecting two sets of rules to fight coronavirus has become a daily challenge, with international borders criss-crossing streets and even running through shops and homes. The tiny town of Baarle-Hertog stands cheek by jowl with its Dutch neighbor Baarle-Nassau in southern Netherlands, but its 22 enclaves are Belgian territory and part of the Antwerp municipality which lies about 50 kilometers (31 miles) away.

Before, nobody worried too much about the fact that Belgian Baarle-Hertog was completely surrounded by the Netherlands, with the border running like a patchwork through the two towns and where the position of one's front door determined which country one lived in. But then the coronavirus pandemic came along-with Belgium following one set of guidelines and the Netherlands another-and confusion reigned.

### Mask or no mask?

In Baarle-Hertog, as in Antwerp, wearing a mask in a public

space is obligatory. Not so in Baarle-Nassau, because Dutch rules require masks only on public transport. "People don't understand whether or not they should wear a mask when they come to my shop," said Sylvia Reijbroek, a local resident whose art gallery is split by the border, marked by simple white crosses on the floor.

The Dutch woman used to be amused by the national boundary splitting the site, but since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic "it's not so nice any more". Customers entering from the gallery's Belgian side have to put on a mask, before a few meters further, inside the gallery, they are allowed to take it off because they've "crossed the border". Before the coronavirus, "there was no problem with borders. Now, we see it's different," Reijbroek, who is an artist, told AFP.

### Tale of two towns

Despite the obvious white crosses demarcating the border between Belgium and the Netherlands, the two villages used to work well together, said Frans De Bont, Baarle-Hertog's mayor. "With corona everything has changed. Nobody knows what to do," he told AFP. "Now it's: 'you're Dutch and you have your rules' and we have Belgian rules which are stricter. And that's strange," said De Bont, whose 7.5 square kilometer village has recorded 14 coronavirus cases so far. During the recent lockdown, Reijbroek had to close her art gallery under Belgian law, while an adjoining shop on the Dutch side could remain open.

Calling it an "intelligent lockdown", the Netherlands was one of the few countries in Europe not to order a full quarantine during the height of the pandemic. "We have two governments

which have different ways of dealing with the coronavirus. It's not very pleasant," Reijbroek said. To help the two towns' population of some 9,600 residents navigate a tricky situation, some businesses now display storefront signs that read: "No mask required here." To add to the absurdity of the situation, Antwerp's authorities recently tightened COVID-19 restrictions by introducing a nightly curfew.

### Unique situation

The history of Baarle-Nassau and Baarle-Hertog dates back to the Middle Ages, and the geographical anomaly has attracted tourists from all over the world. In 1198, the territory was carved up when Henry I, Duke of Brabant, gave Godfried of Schoten, Lord of Breda, some land. By 1830, when Belgium became independent and separated from the Netherlands, the question about precise borders once again came to the fore. The border was finally settled in 1995, some 165 years later. This is a "unique" case in the world, said Willem van Gool, director of the Baarle-Nassau and Baarle-Hertog tourist office.

"You could say that we are the world capital of enclaves. We are used to it," he said. "But of course, with the coronavirus, we have new problems to solve," explained Van Gool. "It's difficult for people here," Mayor De Bont conceded. But for De Bont it's not a competition to see which country has implemented the most effective measures against coronavirus, so clearly seen in the way the two towns deal with pandemic. "We are working on something bigger. We are busy with a war (against coronavirus) now," he said. Both countries "are doing their best". —AFP