

International

Britain set for tougher rules to combat spiraling virus cases

Hungary cools on Russian COVID jab, scolds EU on vaccines

LONDON: British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said yesterday he was "reconciled" to the prospect of tougher restrictions to combat spiraling coronavirus cases, as a row flared over whether schools should reopen. "It may be that we need to do things in the next few weeks that will be tougher in many parts of the country," Johnson told the BBC's The Andrew Marr Show.

"I'm fully, fully reconciled to that." Britain recorded 57,725 new cases on Saturday, its highest total of the entire pandemic. Health officials are concerned that the surging numbers could overwhelm hospitals during their busiest time of the year. Johnson told parents of young children that they should "absolutely" send them to schools reopening after Christmas, despite the closure of some establishments in the worst-affected areas. "I understand people's frustrations, I understand people's anxieties but there is no doubt in my mind that schools are safe and that education is a priority.

"We've really fought very hard throughout this pandemic across the country to keep schools open," he added. But National Association of Head Teachers leader Paul Whiteman called on the government to delay the reopening of schools after the Christmas break "so that we can agree the right mitigations... to make them COVID-secure." "We agree with everybody that school is the best place for children, we just want to do that well, we want to make it a sustainable return," he told BBC Breakfast television. Johnson said that public health experts had highlighted the long term damage of children being kept out of school.

'Tough period ahead'

"There are many factors you have to take into account, particularly deprivation in left-behind communities," he told Marr. "The issue is how can you stop schools being places the virus can circulate. Weekly lateral flow testing in schools I believe can make a huge difference."

Fifth body found in Norway mudslide, five still missing

OSLO: Rescue workers have uncovered a fifth body four days after a landslide buried homes near Norway's capital, police said yesterday, as the search goes on for five people still missing. The tragedy occurred in the early hours of Wednesday when houses were destroyed and shifted hundreds of meters under a torrent of mud at the village of Ask, 25 kilometers (15 miles) northeast of Oslo. "Just before six am a deceased person was found," Sunday's police statement said.

The discovery of a fourth body had been made Saturday after three were recovered the day before at the bleak, snow-covered scene at Ask, in Gjerdrum municipality. Police on Saturday identified the body of the first person found on Friday as 31-year-old Eirik Grinolen. The identities of the four other dead have not been released. But police on Friday published a list of the



Rescue teams are seen searching the area of a landslide in Ask, Norway, yesterday. Rescue workers have uncovered a fifth body four days after a landslide buried homes near Norway's capital, police said, as the search goes on for five people still missing. — AFP

Egypt approves Chinese Sinopharm COVID-19 vaccine

CAIRO: Egypt has approved the use of a Covid-19 vaccine developed by Chinese pharma giant Sinopharm with its rollout to start later in January, the health minister said. "The Egyptian pharmaceutical authority approved on Saturday the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine," Hala Zayed said late Saturday, on the local MBC Masr channel.

The first batch of the vaccine was delivered in December, with further doses expected this month.

"The second shipment of this vaccine is due to arrive in the second or third week of January, and as soon as it arrives, we will start vaccinations," the minister said. Each batch of the vaccine consists of 50,000 doses, and the ministry has announced that the first group to receive it will be medical workers.

Zayed said Egypt plans to purchase 40 million doses of the Sinopharm jab. Egypt, the Arab world's most populous country with around 100 million inhabitants, has recorded more than 140,000 cases of the Covid-19 disease, including 7,800 deaths. After a brief lull, the number of infections rose dramatically in late 2020, from around 100 new cases confirmed per day in October, to some 1,400 daily cases currently. Sinopharm announced on Wednesday that one of its vaccines, to be distributed in China, was 79 percent effective. The jabs efficacy is lower than that of vaccines developed by Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna—both over 90 percent effective. — AFP



LONDON: A paramedic wheels a patient out of an ambulance outside the Emergency Department of St Thomas' Hospital in London yesterday. The British prime minister said yesterday he was "reconciled" to the prospect of tougher restrictions to combat spiraling coronavirus cases. — AFP

Johnson, who has been criticized for his handling of the pandemic that has taken more than 74,000 lives in Britain, revealed that 530,000 doses of the newly-approved AstraZeneca/Oxford vaccine will be available for use from today. "We can see the way ahead in terms of a route forward, we can see how we can get out of this. But we do have a tough period ahead," he warned.

Britain has already vaccinated around one million people after approving the Pfizer vaccine in early December. "We hope to be able to do tens of millions in the course of the next three months," said the prime minister. Hungary is unlikely to use Russia's coronavirus vaccine due to its limited production capacity, Prime Minister Viktor Orban said yesterday while criticizing the EU's vaccine acquisition approach. Often at logger-

heads with Brussels over democratic standards, Orban has sent experts to monitor vaccine development in Russia and China, and received samples of Moscow's controversial Sputnik V jab. "We know that the Russian vaccine is good, but there is not enough of it and probably will not be, as there are production capacity limits," Orban said in an interview on Hungarian public radio. In comparison with Sputnik V "the Chinese (vaccine) is more promising, it seems that it will be available sooner and in greater quantities," said Orban.

"Ideally, you will be able to choose whether you want to vaccinate yourself with either a vaccine from the west or a Chinese vaccine," he said. In November Budapest boasted that Hungary was the first European country to receive test samples of the Russian vaccine. — AFP

names of all the eight adults, a two-year-old and a 13-year-old child who went missing on Wednesday. Ten people were also injured in the landslide, including one seriously who was transferred to Oslo for treatment.

About a thousand people have been evacuated out of a local population of 5,000, because of fears for the safety of their homes as the land continues to move.

"We are at a hotel," one of the evacuees, Olav Gjerdingen, told AFP. "It is a completely surreal and terrible situation." Search and rescue teams have been using sniffer dogs, helicopters and drones in a bid to find survivors. The search teams were also digging channels in the ground to evacuate casualties.

The authorities have banned all aircraft from the disaster area until 3 pm Monday as they conduct aerial searches. The Norwegian Water Resources and Energy Directorate (NVE) said the disaster was a "quick clay slide" of approximately 300 by 800 meters (yards).

Quick clay is a sort of clay found in Norway and Sweden that can collapse and turn to fluid when over-stressed. Prime Minister Erna Solberg described it as one of the biggest landslides the country had ever experienced. The royal court said in a statement that King Harald, his wife Sonja and Crown Prince Haakon were to visit the disaster area later yesterday morning. — AFP

EU denounces conditions of Bosnia migrants

SARAJEVO: The living conditions of hundreds of homeless migrants in Bosnia, bordering the European Union, are "completely unacceptable," EU envoy Johann Sattler said Saturday. The migrants have been left homeless in freezing and rainy conditions since their camp near the northwestern town of Bihac burned down last month. "The situation is completely unacceptable," said Sattler, the EU's Special Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

"Lives and basic human rights of many hundreds of people are seriously jeopardized," he added after a meeting with Bosnia's Security Minister Selmo Cikotic. Fire engulfed the Lipa migrant center in northwestern Bosnia on December 23. There were no casualties from the blaze but much of the infrastructure of the site was destroyed. The incident deepened the crisis over where to house thousands of migrants, as Bosnian authorities failed to find new accommodation for the newly homeless. Police believe the blaze on December 23 was started deliberately by migrants living there to protest the withdrawal of the UN's International Organization for Migration (IOM), which had been running the camp. The IOM had left complaining that the accommodation was not fit to house people during the cold winter months.

Opened in April, the Lipa camp had never been hooked up with electricity or running water. Sattler met Bosnian minister Cikotic on Saturday along with the

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Germany's BioNTech racing to ramp up vaccine production

FRANKFURT: German firm BioNTech said Friday it was racing to ramp up production of its Covid-19 jab in Europe, to fill the "gap" left by the lack of other approved vaccines.

The vaccine developed by BioNTech and its US partner Pfizer was the first to be approved in the European Union in late December. Countries including Britain, Canada and the United States okayed the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine earlier and have since also greenlighted jabs by US firm Moderna or Oxford/AstraZeneca, leaving the EU's inoculation drive lagging behind. "The current situation is not rosy, there's a hole because there's an absence of other approved vaccines and we have to fill this gap with our vaccine," BioNTech co-founder Ugur Sahin told Der Spiegel weekly. Criticism of the slow pace of Europe's vaccine rollout has grown louder in recent days.

In Germany, where the focus has been on inoculating elderly people in care homes, senior doctors have complained that hospital staff are being left waiting for their jabs despite being in the priority groups.

'Basket of suppliers'

France has seen similar complaints, prompting the government to announce that health workers aged over 50 could get the shot from Monday—sooner than originally planned. Part of the problem is that the EU placed a relatively low order of 300 million doses for its 27 member states, and the contract was only signed in November, later than other countries.

Fellow BioNTech founder Ozlem Tureci, who is also Sahin's wife, told Spiegel that the EU had assumed there would be "a basket of different suppliers" to choose from, given the global race to develop a pandemic-ending jab. "Such an approach makes sense. But then at some point it became clear that many would be unable to deliver quickly." — AFP

German, Italian and Austrian ambassadors, according to a statement released by the EU delegation in Sarajevo. The aim of the meeting was "to discuss urgent solutions for the extremely concerning migration situation," the statement said. Bosnia lies on the so-called Balkans route used since 2018 by tens of thousands of migrants heading towards Western Europe as they flee war and poverty in the Middle East, Asia and in Africa.

The country currently hosts some 8,500 migrants. The European Commission, which finances the running of several migrant camps in Bosnia, has called for another centre in Bihac to be reopened, but local and regional officials oppose the idea. That migrant center, in an abandoned factory, was closed in October under pressure from local residents. In the very decentralized



Buses carrying migrants wait on a dirt road as they leave the migrant camp "Lipa", after it was destroyed by a fire, near the northwestern Bosnian town of Bihac. — AFP

News in brief

Iranian cleric Mesbah-Yazdi dies

TEHRAN: Influential Iranian cleric Ayatollah Mohammad Taghi Mesbah-Yazdi, an ultraconservative figure close to supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, died in Tehran on Friday, state news agency IRNA reported. The 85-year-old was under medical care and hospitalized days ago due to a "digestive disease" at a Tehran hospital, IRNA said, citing a statement from his office. A veteran revolutionary close to Khamenei, Mesbah-Yazdi was also known as a staunch supporter of ultraconservative former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. However, he lifted his support for the firebrand president during his second term due to his "deviation" after Ahmadinejad had a falling out with the supreme leader. — AFP



Mohammad Taghi Mesbah-Yazdi

3 Russians, Ukrainian freed in Libya

MOSCOW: Three Russians and one Ukrainian have been released from captivity in Libya, the head of a controversial Moscow-based political organization said Saturday, drawing attention to the Kremlin's role in conflict-torn Libya. The head of Defense of National Values, a Russian organization that is part of a media group linked to sanctioned business man Yevgeny Prigozhin—made the announcement on Telegram. Alexander Malkevich said the four individuals had been "kidnapped" several weeks ago, but did not clarify their purpose in the country or specify who they had been detained by. — AFP

Car bombs kill six in north Syria

BEIRUT: Two car bombings in separate parts of Turkish-controlled areas of northern Syria killed six people on Saturday, including children, a war monitor said. In the first, a car bomb near a vegetable market killed five people including two children in the border town of Ras al-Ain, the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. A second explosives-rigged vehicle detonated in the town of Jindires in the Afrin region, taking the life of one civilian and wounding nine others including two children, it said. Such explosions are common in both Ras al-Ain and the Afrin region, which Turkish forces and their Syrian proxies seized from Kurdish fighters in 2019 and 2018 respectively. — AFP

Armed groups attack Bangassou

BANGUI: Armed groups attacked the Central African Republic's southeastern city of Bangassou yesterday, weeks after rebels were accused of an attempted coup and days before expected results from a tense presidential election. A coalition of rebel groups, which control two thirds of the coup-prone country, has been waging an offensive since last month initially aimed at disrupting elections that were nonetheless held on December 27. "The city has been under attack since 5.25 am (0425 GMT), and there are clashes everywhere," Rosevel Pierre Louis, head of the UN peacekeeping force MINUSCA's regional office in Bangassou, said. — AFP

country, the federal government has also suggested the center, which could house 2,000 people, be reopened. However it is not in a position to order local authorities to do so. The UN's human rights office had already warned against "unacceptable suffering" of the migrants from the Lipa camp, calling for an urgent solution of the issue.

In an attempt to ease the migrant crisis, the Bosnian government has deployed the army to set up tents on the site of the burned-down reception centre, but the migrants appear unwilling to use them as they too are unheated and without water. In a sign of the growing protest, the migrants refused the meal distributed on Friday and Saturday by the Red Cross and a local charity, a Red Cross official told FTV public television. — AFP