



Trump impeachment trial to begin only in second week of February

Sri Lankan minister tests positive for COVID after endorsing sorcery



WASHINGTON, DC: President Joe Biden speaks during an event on economic crisis in the State Dining Room of the White House on Friday in Washington, DC. —AFP

Biden undoes Trump migration orders

Presidential signatures lift 'Muslim ban' which was enforced in 2017

NEW YORK: Within hours of taking office, President Joe Biden undid some of Donald Trump's most controversial immigration policies and sparked cautious hope that millions living in the shadows could one day get legal status in the US.

Scribbled signatures from his pen on Wednesday lifted an entry ban for people from many majority Muslim nations and halted construction of Trump's border wall with Mexico, heartening immigration defenders left reeling by four years of "America First" nationalism. Yet advocates see new battles ahead, including whether lawmakers can finally overhaul the nation's immigration system which has been branded as "broken" with some 11 million undocumented people living in limbo. These discussions, however, have only begun as the Trump administration has just left the White House. His so-called "Muslim ban," which in 2017 targeted citizens of Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen, ignited international outrage and led to domestic court rulings against it.

Iraq and Sudan were dropped from the list, but in 2018 the Supreme Court upheld a later version of the ban for

the other nations—as well as North Korea and Venezuela. As part of his first acts, Biden signed new protections for so-called "Dreamers"—immigrants who arrived illegally as children and had been temporarily shielded from deportation by a program Trump tried to dismantle. In addition, the new president overturned one of his predecessor's orders pushing aggressive efforts to find and deport unauthorized immigrants, and imposed a 100-day suspension on most deportations.

Immigration advocates erupted in support for Biden's first orders. "There is that dark cloud that used to hang over our heads, which is gone," said Camille Mackler, the executive director of a pro-migrant lawyers group founded against the ban targeting Muslim nations.

Republican pushback

"After four years of what was a war on immigration and immigrants, this feels like the dawn of a new day," said Krish O'Mara Vignarajah, president of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service. "I think (this) is pretty significant action for, you know, a president unilaterally on

day one," she added. Aura Hernandez, a 39-year-old immigrant from Guatemala who doesn't have papers, heaved a sigh of relief.

"These past four years have been the worst of my life," said the mother of five, who took refuge for several months in a Manhattan church in 2018 to avoid deportation. But like millions of others in her position, Hernandez has to keep her hope in check because Biden's executive orders do not change the fundamentals of the nation's immigration system. The president's nominee to lead the nation's Homeland Security department, Alejandro Mayorkas, said this week that Biden has "committed to presenting Congress, on day one, with an immigration reform bill that, once and for all, fixes I think what we all can agree is a broken immigration system."

Previous efforts to pass a major reform of the system have come tantalizingly close but failed in the end, leaving powerful Democratic Senator Bob Menendez to describe what he expects will be a "Herculean" effort in Congress this time around. A proposed bill would allow immigrants without documents, but who pay taxes and have no criminal record or

national security issues, to work legally for six years and then get on a possible track to permanent legal status.

Menendez noted that 60 of 100 votes would be needed for passage in the Senate, which means Democrats would have to have bipartisan support. Immigration reform is a particularly delicate issue for Republicans, who have been skeptical of regularization measures and some of whom will be up for re-election in 2022. Menendez called on the business community, especially in the migrant-heavy agricultural and tech sectors, to push Republicans for action. Apple boss Tim Cook said on Wednesday he was ready to work with the Biden administration and Congress for "comprehensive solutions to fix our broken immigration system." Yet any reform proposal will likely require negotiation and thus compromise, Menendez noted. The legal status of millions of undocumented people "is a major immigration issue that hasn't been resolved for decades," said Sahar Aziz, a law professor at Rutgers University. "Each time a Democratic president tries to find a path to citizenship, Republicans push back." —AFP

Inside the world's biggest vaccine factory, India's Serum Institute

PUNE: The tiny clinking vials supervised by silent PPE-wearing technicians belie the excitement inside the world's largest vaccine manufacturer, the Serum Institute of India, a major player in the fight against coronavirus. The firm, founded in 1966 in the western city of Pune, is producing millions of doses of the Covishield vaccine, developed by AstraZeneca and Oxford University, for India and much of the developing world.

Unlike the rival Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, Covishield can be stored and transported using standard refrigeration. It is also significantly cheaper than the vaccines developed by Pfizer or the US firm Moderna, making it better suited for countries with poorer populations and rusty infrastructure.

Even before the pandemic, the Indian firm was a world leader in vaccines, producing 1.5 billion doses a year and inoculating two out of three children in 170 countries against diseases such as polio, mumps, meningitis and measles. Its journey kicked off on a stud farm, where the firm's owners, the Poonawalla family, began breeding horses in 1946, before a conversation with a vet sparked the realization that antitoxin serum extracted from the animals could be used to make vaccines.

The Serum Institute soon became a market leader thanks

to its cheap and effective drugs, which were eagerly sought after by price-conscious governments and consumers, prompting the company to expand at a dizzying rate. Adar Poonawalla, its 40-year-old CEO, has spent nearly a billion dollars in recent years enlarging and improving the sprawling Pune campus.

As a result, when the coronavirus pandemic began to sweep across the world, the company, which recorded annual revenues of over \$800 million in 2019-20 and is debt-free, was in pole position to reap the rewards.

'Used to pressure'

The palm-fringed Pune campus, whose grounds boast horse-shaped topiaries in a playful nod to the firm's origins, is home to several buildings where vaccines are manufactured and scrutinized for quality before being deposited into sterilized vials and stored for delivery. From Brazil to South Africa, there is no shortage of customers, with governments clamoring to buy Covishield.

With Poonawalla vowing to reserve 50 percent of Covishield stocks for the Indian market, New Delhi, which intends to immunize 300 million people by July, is engaging in a bout of vaccine diplomacy, planning to supply 20 million doses to its South Asian neighbors. The Serum Institute also plans to supply 200 million doses to Covax, a World Health Organization-backed effort to procure and distribute inoculations to poor countries. If all this sounds overwhelming, the firm's bosses are not worried. "We are used to these kinds of pressures because even in the past there were situations when we were required to step up the production to meet individual countries' requirements," Suresh Jadhav, Serum Institute's executive director, told AFP.

Even a deadly fire at an under-construction building this week failed to dent confidence, with Poonawalla promptly



PUNE: Uddhav Thackeray (left), the chief minister of India's Maharashtra state, speaks as the Serum Institute of India's CEO Adar Poonawalla watches during a press conference in Pune on Friday. —AFP

tweeting that "there would be no loss of #COVISHIELD production due to multiple production buildings that I had kept in reserve to deal with such contingencies".

The pandemic has transformed Poonawalla's public profile, from a jet-setting billionaire known for his expensive taste in cars and fine art to a pharma-tycoon applauded for his willingness to take risks and his commitment to affordable vaccines. Unsurprisingly, the father-of-two has not held back from taking so-called anti-vaxxers to task, including berating US rapper Kanye West for spreading conspiracy theories. "Though we enjoy your music very much @KanyeWest, your views on #vaccines come across as irresponsible and borderline dangerous, considering the influence you have today and may have in the future: vaccines save lives," Poonawalla tweeted in July. —AFP

"All the current evidence continues to show that both the vaccines we are currently using remain effective both against the old variant and this new variant," he added. The government appears on track to meet its pledge to vaccinate 15 million of the most vulnerable by mid-February. It is also aiming to inoculate the entire adult population by September at the latest. England has been in a third nationwide lockdown since early this month, with similar restrictions in place in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, where devolved administrations are responsible for health policy. New Office for National Statistics (ONS) data released Friday showed the stay-at-home order had helped prompt a slight drop in infection rates across England last week.

On average, one in 55 people have got the virus there, rising to one in 35 in London, it found. However, chief medical officer Chris Whitty warned that despite the "signs of improvement" cases remained "at a very high level" and hospitals were still in danger of becoming overwhelmed. The government said Friday it was launching a new national campaign featuring hospital staff and COVID-19 patients, in a bid to remind the public of the extreme pressures still facing the state-run health service. The "emotive" TV advert "challenges the public to think about the impact their actions might have by asking: 'Can you look them in the eyes and tell them you're helping by staying at home?'" —AFP

Baghdad blasts bare gaps in Iraq's strained military

BAGHDAD: Twin suicide blasts in Baghdad claimed by the Islamic State group have exposed gaps within Iraq's security forces, weakened by the COVID-19 pandemic, rival armed groups and political tensions. At least 32 people were killed and more than 100 wounded in the double-tap suicide attack that targeted a commercial district in Baghdad on Thursday.

It was the deadliest attack in three years in the capital, which has been relatively calm since IS's territorial defeat in late 2017. But it has also illustrated accumulating shortfalls in Iraq's patchwork of security forces, experts said. "IS isn't coming back. The fact that this is news shows how good the situation has become compared to the past," said Jack Watling, a research fellow at the Royal United Services Institute in London.

"But there are some very clear problems in the Iraqi security sector, and this is reflective of that." Following the US-led invasion in 2003, Iraq's security forces had to be effectively rebuilt from the ground up, relying heavily on training by foreign armies.

The COVID-19 pandemic put an abrupt halt to that. Living together at bases with little social distancing, Iraqi troops were some of the country's first coronavirus victims.

In March 2020, the US-led coalition announced it was pulling out foreign trainers to stem the pandemic's spread. "The decreased training over the past year because of COVID-19 (created) a gap there," a top US official in Baghdad told AFP last month. It also meant Iraq's security services had decreased access to the coalition's communications surveillance—"an early warning system" that was crucial to nipping IS attacks in the bud, said Watling.

'Gap to exploit'

Many of those withdrawals became permanent. The US-led coalition announced last year that Iraq's army was capable of fighting IS remnants on its own and pulled out of eight bases across the country. At the same time, citing the improving security situation, Baghdad's authorities lifted the concrete blast walls and checkpoints that had congested the city for years. Battle-hardened units were moved out of cities to chase down IS sleeper cells in rural areas, with less-experienced units taking over urban security. Security analyst Alex Mello said those rotations combined with less-reliable intelligence may have eventually granted IS "a gap to exploit". —AFP

Evidence UK virus strain more deadly, says Johnson

LONDON: The coronavirus strain that has swept Britain and beyond in recent months could be more deadly as well as more transmissible, Prime Minister Boris Johnson said on Friday. The sobering news came as the UK sees record deaths from COVID-19, following a surge in cases and hospitalizations since the variant was first identified in southeast England in September.

The strain has also spread to more than 60 nations—including China, where the pandemic began more than a year ago—according to the World Health Organization (WHO). "In addition to spreading more quickly, it also now appears that there is some evidence that the new variant... may be associated with a higher degree of mortality," Johnson said at a news conference. He blamed the variant for the grim situation engulfing Britain, where another 1,401 fatalities were announced Friday, taking the overall toll to 95,981 — the highest in Europe. Virus deaths have risen 16 percent over the past week, while the number of people hospitalized with COVID-19 is

approaching double the number seen during the worst days of the first wave of the pandemic in April.

Chief government scientist Patrick Vallance said the new variant could be 30-40 percent more deadly for some age groups, although he stressed the assessment relied on sparse data. "There's a lot of uncertainty around these numbers and we need more work to get a precise handle on it, but it obviously is of concern," he said, flanking Johnson in Downing Street. "You will see that across the different age groups as well, a similar sort of relative increase in the risk."

However Mike Ryan, executive director of the WHO's health emergencies program, said it had not yet seen evidence that the variant is more lethal. "What we are seeing is that if you infect more people, more people will get very sick, and if more people get very sick more people will die," he added. "Increasing incidence leads to higher mortality."

'Signs of improvement'

Britain is in the grip of its third and worst wave of the virus. The country is pinning its hopes of a return to normality later this year on the biggest vaccination program in its history, which began last month.

Johnson revealed 5.4 million people had now received their first dose of two vaccines currently being administered, with a daily record of 400,000 people inoculated in the last 24 hours.