

International

The American South: A weak link in the COVID vaccination campaign

Alabama has some of the country's lowest vaccination rates

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama: With a sizable Black minority traditionally mistrustful of vaccines and with many conservative rural whites convinced that the vaccine is more dangerous than COVID-19 itself, Southern US states like Alabama have some of the country's lowest vaccination rates, leaving the disadvantaged region vulnerable to dangerous new virus variants. But some people are trying their best to change that. With a small team and an energy level that belies the crushing Southern heat, county commissioner Sheila Tyson knocks on the doors of modest homes in Memorial Park, a mainly Black neighborhood of Birmingham, Alabama's largest city.

"This Sunday, I want you all out there (in the park)," Tyson, a leader of the Alabama Black Women's Roundtable, tells anyone who opens their door. "We will have free food as long as it lasts, when it's gone it's gone, and we are going to have vaccine shots—have you had your vaccines?" Despite an injured foot, Tyson is one of the few local officials to actively campaign for vaccine acceptance, tirelessly visiting parks, schools, day-care centers and stadiums in some of the area's poorest neighborhoods.

'Dropping like flies'

"We are in a race against living and dying," she says. When COVID cases spiked in Alabama in December and January, people were "dropping like flies," she says. And as the Delta variant of coronavirus spreads across the United States, she says, "We are very concerned, not only about the Black and brown people but about all people." Tyson has heard the conspiracy theories that keep some people from getting the vaccine, including the notion that "the vaccine would sterilize African American men." Such baseless ideas stem from a grim history of discriminatory healthcare practices—not least the infa-

mous syphilis experiments carried out by the US government from 1932 to 1972 on hundreds of unwitting Black men in Tuskegee, 120 miles (200 kilometers) from Birmingham.

As a result, many African Americans—who represent 27 percent of the state's five million inhabitants—have a "wait and see" attitude toward the vaccines, said Janice Cobb, a 60-year-old seamstress in Memorial Park. Given such widespread suspicion, ultra-local efforts like Sheila Tyson's are the most effective approach, said state health officer Scott Harris—but they are not enough to substantially raise vaccination rates.

As of today, only 40 percent of Alabama residents aged 12 and above have received at least one dose of a COVID vaccine, a rate only marginally above those of other Southern states like Louisiana (38 percent) and Mississippi, which at 36 percent has the lowest rate in the US—with all of them far behind the national average of 64 percent. Those states played a considerable role in preventing the Biden administration from reaching its declared goal of having 70 percent of Americans vaccinated by this July 4 holiday weekend.

Fear of being 'forced'

Harris is not surprised by the lagging results of the region, which is among the poorest in the country. "We are at or near the bottom in just about every health indicator," whether in terms of cancer, cardiovascular disease or child mortality, he told AFP. But the extent of vaccine hesitancy among white men has surprised him. The belief that the vaccine carries higher risk than the disease is widespread in some rural areas. "We didn't really anticipate the degree to which we would see that resistance," Harris said. Frank Arant, a barber in Oneonta, a small town north of Birmingham, is among the vaccine skeptics. As a 70-year-old dia-



BIRMINGHAM, Alabama: A sign encouraging COVID-19 vaccination is seen outside a park. —AFP

betic, he is particularly vulnerable to the virus. Still, he is convinced the vaccine could kill him. "We have had a lot of people in our barber shop to die from taking this shot," he said. "They would be here that week and saying, 'I'm going to get my shot,' and then three days later—dead. That scares people."

Despite such anecdotes, health experts say that with millions of doses already administered, the vaccine has proved extremely safe. Oneonta is in Blount County—where 90 percent of voters supported Donald Trump last year—and vaccine resistance there has an undeniable political component. People are "worried about being forced to take it, with President Biden telling everybody 'You got to do this,'" said Arant.

But, he added, "It's our lives and we are not going to take it. The people in the South make their own decisions." To J.D. Davidson, a 22-year-old soldier from Birmingham's Homewood suburb, "a lot of it stems from the anti-authoritarian stance of Southerners that has long been rooted in Southern culture. "As political divisions increase, it becomes that much more important to not do it because it helps strengthen your identity." He believes that when prominent Democratic figures like First Lady Jill Biden visit the South to encourage vaccination, "it only makes things worse." Given the context, Harris does not expect a major increase in vaccination rates in the next few months. —AFP

World's safest place? Vermont leads US vaccine race

BURLINGTON, Vermont: Vermont — known for Bernie Sanders, maple syrup and the birthplace of Ben and Jerry's ice cream — has a new claim to fame: America's most-vaccinated state against COVID-19. Home to red farmhouses and signs warning drivers of moose, the US's second-least populated state recently became the first to partially vaccinate 80 percent of eligible residents. "It makes us probably the safest place in the country and maybe the world," says health commissioner Mark Levine, who has a bobblehead of top US pandemic advisor Anthony Fauci on his desk.

The rural, northeastern state has administered at least one vaccine dose to 82 percent of residents aged 12 and over, well above the US's national rate of 64 percent. Its vaccination rate is more than double that of the worst-performing state Mississippi. Officials and locals credit Vermont's success to widespread vaccine clinics, trust in political leaders and science and residents' strong sense of responsibility to their community. "Vermonters prioritize their health, which is a good starting point," Levine tells AFP at the state health department offices in Burlington on Lake Champlain.

"And building upon that, Vermonters are very cooperative and compliant," he adds, citing a tradition of town meetings and "civic engagement" across New England, including Maine and Massachusetts where vaccine rates are also high. Vermont, whose population is 94 percent white and which has one of the highest levels of education in the United States, has registered only around 250 deaths from COVID-19. The United States overall has suffered more than 605,000 COVID-related deaths.

Moderate Republican Governor Phil Scott lifted all remaining restrictions when Vermont reached the 80 percent milestone last month, after lifting the state's mask mandate in May. Evan David Warner, a busker on Burlington's main Church Street, agrees that Vermont's tight-knit population of just 640,000 was key to life returning to normal. "Vermonters believe that we all have a responsibility to keep each other safe. It's a social moral code," the 23-year-old guitarist says between songs.

Vermont's scattered populace and mountainous terrain, popular with hikers in summer and skiers in winter, presented vaccinators with the challenge of reaching everyone. As shots slowed at main sites, pop-up clinics were set up on farms, lakeside beaches, state parks and raceways to help reach people in rural areas, including migrant farm workers.

"We realized we had to go out to them," explains nurse Ellen Monger, as she waits for walk-ins at a farmer's market in Northfield, population 6,000. "Sometimes that means traveling on dirt roads in the middle of nowhere and going to someone's home where they're homebound. I've literally been to places I never expected to as a nurse," she adds, as locals stock up on organic teas, jarred pickles and freshly picked strawberries. Fifteen miles (24 kilometers) away in Websterville, the National Guard administers the single-shot Johnson and Johnson vaccine to employees at Vermont Creamery. —AFP

Cyprus says huge forest blaze fully 'under control'

NICOSIA, Cyprus: Firefighters in Cyprus said yesterday they had brought under control the island's worst blaze on record, which ripped through mountain forests and farmland, killing four people and destroying scores of homes. Water-bombing planes from Greece and Israel and British aircraft from bases on the Mediterranean island helped douse the huge fire, which blackened 55 square kilometers (21 square miles) of the Troodos Mountains. The Cyprus Forestry Department said yesterday that "the fire that broke out on Saturday... came under full control today" at 8:00 am (0500 GMT).

Four Egyptian farm laborers aged in their 20s and 30s were killed by the flames as they tried to escape on foot after their car plunged into a ravine. The wildfire, described as the worst since the Republic of Cyprus was established in 1960, destroyed 50 homes, damaged power lines and

forced the evacuation of 10 villages, authorities reported. "Everything was a nightmare and pure hell here, the village was surrounded by fire," said Akis Giorgiou, 45, from the hamlet of Arakapas.

The fire, fanned by strong winds and exacerbated by a heatwave that has baked the island in temperatures over 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit), sent up a vast cloud of smoke that was visible from sea and from the other side of the Troodos mountain range. More than 600 people from the emergency services and army were involved in tackling the blaze, along with a dozen aircraft and 70 fire trucks as well as a reconnaissance drone, the forestry department said.

Firefighters were still deployed en masse yesterday around the badly-hit village of Arakapas, near Limassol, to tackle any potential new outbreaks, the department said. AFP reporters had seen thick gnarled trunks of



ARAKAPAS, Cyprus: Trees burn in a forest on the slopes of the Troodos mountain chain, as a giant fire rages on the Mediterranean island of Cyprus, during the night of July 3, 2021. —AFP

ancient olive trees reduced to smoldering stumps and grey ash replacing yellowed scrub as far as the eye could see. A 67-year-old farmer was arrested and remanded in custody on suspicion of having unintentionally started the enormous blaze while burning stubble, a charge he denied.

Police said an eyewitness had seen him leaving Arakapas in his car at the

time the fire started there. He could face charges of recklessly causing four deaths. Interior Minister Nicos Nouris said the four Egyptians' charred bodies had been found outside the village of Odos in Larnaca district. Their burnt-out vehicle was discovered at the bottom of a ravine and the four bodies were some 600 meters (yards) away. —AFP

Rest of Florida apartment block demolished

SURFSIDE, Florida: A controlled explosion brought down the unstable remains of the collapsed apartment block in Florida late Sunday ahead of a threatening tropical storm, with the confirmed death toll at 24 and 121 people missing. Video footage showed the rest of the 12-story Champlain Towers South in Surfside, outside Miami, being demolished just after 10:30 pm local time (0230 GMT). Preparing the site for demolition ahead of the possible arrival of Tropical Storm Elsa early next week had required that the search for victims be halted on Saturday. Most of the building collapsed in the early hours of June 24, sending up a huge cloud of dust and rattling Americans unprepared for such a deadly urban disaster.

Authorities had said the unstable remaining structure posed a threat to search and rescue teams still at the scene, though hopes of finding anyone

alive have diminished. The video footage of the demolition showed smoke, dust and other debris blowing away from the site after the building came down following two loud booms. Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava had announced the schedule at an earlier press conference, saying the operation would use "small, strategically placed explosives." "The demolition itself is confined to the immediate area around the building," she said. "However, there is dust and other particles that are an unavoidable byproduct of all types of demolition and, as a precautionary measure, we're urging residents in the immediate vicinity to stay indoors."

Storm threat

With Tropical Storm Elsa rumbling northward through the Caribbean, authorities accelerated the demolition schedule. County mayor Levine Cava said "bringing the building down in a



SURFSIDE, Florida: This combination of pictures created on July 4, 2021 shows the rest of the Champlain South tower just before being demolished (top L) and as it is demolished by a controlled explosion in Surfside. —AFP

controlled manner is critical to expanding" the search operation as teams have been unable to delve further due to the risk of further collaps-

es. President Joe Biden visited the scene last week and met grieving relatives and rescue workers, hailing their resilience and strength. —AFP

Ethiopia's Abiy boasts of military might despite rebel gains

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia: Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed said yesterday his government could easily recruit one million new fighters but wants to foster a period of "silence" in the country's war-hit Tigray region. The 2019 Nobel Peace Prize winner's remarks came one week after Tigray's capital Mekele fell to the Tigray Defense Forces (TDF) rebel group and Abiy's government declared a unilateral ceasefire in the eight-month-old conflict. The TDF has described its seizure of

Mekele and most of the rest of the northern region of Tigray as a major victory, while Abiy and other officials have countered that federal forces executed a strategic pullback to focus on other threats.

"In one, two or three weeks, 100,000 trained, armed and organized special forces can be mobilized," Abiy told lawmakers. "If said special force isn't enough, if a militia is needed, in one or two months half a million militiamen can be organized. One million youths can be mobilized and trained." But Abiy also said officials had "decided there should be a period of silence for everyone to think".

Tigrayan leaders on Sunday issued their first formal response to Abiy's ceasefire call, saying they would only accept it if forces from Eritrea and Ethiopia's Amhara region—who have been backing the Ethiopian army—also withdrew from the region. They also called for "proceedings" to hold Abiy and

Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki accountable for "damage" inflicted during the fighting, which has been marked by grisly massacres and widespread sexual violence.

Abiy did not address those conditions yesterday. Thousands of people have been killed in the conflict and hundreds of thousands face hunger in Tigray, an important economic and industrial region in the Horn of Africa nation. Last week the TDF paraded what it said were thousands of captive Ethiopian soldiers through the streets of Mekele. In his remarks yesterday, however, Abiy said the TDF seized territory only because the army decided to leave, a process he said unfolded for more than a month. He also offered full-praise for the army. "Our defense forces are not paid enough. They climb up and down mountains. In the rain, in the sun they fight for the dignity of the country," Abiy said. —AFP