

International

Thailand defends COVID-19 vaccine 'mix-and-match' after WHO warning

Russia says India will produce 300m Sputnik V doses each year

BANGKOK: Thailand yesterday defended mixing two different COVID-19 vaccines to battle a surge in infections, after the WHO's top scientist warned it was a "dangerous trend" not backed by evidence. The kingdom is struggling to contain its latest outbreak fuelled by the highly contagious Delta variant, with cases and deaths skyrocketing and the healthcare system stretched thin.

Authorities said they will mix a first dose of the Chinese-made Sinovac jab with a second dose of AstraZeneca to try and achieve a "booster" effect in six weeks instead of 12. Thailand's chief virologist Yong Poovorawan said this would be possible by combining an

inactivated virus vaccine-Sinovac-with a viral vector vaccine such as AstraZeneca.

"We can't wait 12 weeks (for a booster effect) in this outbreak where the disease is spreading fast," he said. "But in the future, if there are better, improved vaccines... we will find a better way to manage the situation." His comments come a day after the World Health Organisation's chief scientist Soumya Swaminathan called the strategy a "dangerous trend".

"We are in a bit of a data-free, evidence-free zone as far as 'mix-and-match'", she said. Thailand has reported more than 353,700 coronavirus cases and 2,847 deaths-

the bulk of them detected since the latest wave kicked off in April from an upscale Bangkok nightlife district.

Healthcare workers were the first in line to receive Sinovac, but authorities said Sunday nearly 900 medical staff-most of them vaccinated with that shot-got COVID-19. They will now also get an AstraZeneca or Pfizer-BioNTech booster shot, authorities said.

Virus hotspot Bangkok and nine other hard-hit provinces are now under tougher restrictions that include a night-time curfew and a ban of gatherings over five people.

Meanwhile, the developers of Russia's Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine said yesterday a deal had been struck with Indian vaccine maker the Serum Institute to produce 300 million doses annually. "The parties intend to produce over 300 million doses of the vaccine in India per year with the first batch expected in September 2021," the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) said in a statement.

Sputnik V was registered by Russia in August last year-the first of four vaccines developed in the country-and the RDIF says it is approved for use in 67 countries. Its hasty development and distribution for use ahead of late-stage trials meant the jab was initially greeted with scepticism.

Sputnik V has since won over experts, in a scientific and geopolitical victory for President Vladimir Putin, who announced late last month he had been inoculated with the vaccine. Kirill Dmitriev, the CEO of RDIF, described the deal with Serum as "a major step" that would increase Sputnik V production capabilities and ultimately "save lives both in India and around the world".

He said that technology transfer had begun and joint production was expected to start in the coming months. Serum Institute CEO Adar Poonawalla said in the statement that since it had shown "high efficacy and a good safety profile, it is critical that the Sputnik vaccine is accessible in full measure for people across India and the world."

In January, the RDIF, which helped finance Sputnik V, announced that it had applied for registration of the vaccine in the European Union. — AFP



NARATHIWAT: A civilian defence volunteer alerts people to lockdown measures including the curfew introduced to halt the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus in the southern province of Narathiwat, as Thailand faces a surge in cases of the virus. — AFP

New COVID rules spark France vaccination rush

PARIS: A record number of French people booked appointments for COVID-19 jabs after President Emmanuel Macron announced restrictions on the unvaccinated, including mandatory tests to enter restaurants. The head of the main website to book vaccination appointments said traffic was at an all-time high following Macron's televised speech on Monday night.

"We recorded 20,000 appointments per minute, an absolute record since the start of the campaign, and it's continued during the night and into this morning," Doctolib boss Stanislas Niox-Chateau told BFMTV. A total of 926,000 people had booked a jab on the site, with 65 percent of them under 35, he added.

Macron announced that from August anyone wanting to go out to eat or drink, take a long-distance train or visit a shopping centre would need to show a "health pass", which means either proof of vaccination or a negative test.

The pass will also be needed to attend a festival, a theatre show or a cinema screening as part of the government's strategy to tackle the surging number of new cases linked to the Delta variant. Free COVID tests will end in September "to encourage vaccination instead of taking many tests", Macron added in the speech watched by 22 million people.

The head of state also announced mandatory vaccinations for healthcare staff, retirement home workers and others working with vulnerable people from September, in line with similar moves in Greece, Italy and Britain.

Objections

The measures sparked fierce criticism by some on social media, with the French word for dictatorship — #Dictature-trending on Twitter amid accusations the government has introduced mandatory vaccination by stealth. Some objected on the grounds that the health pass infringed on the personal liberty to choose to get vaccinated or not, while anti-vaxxers pushed conspiracy theories about the links between the government and pharmaceutical companies.

A tweet from Macron from December 2020 in which he said "the vaccine will not be obligatory" was also shared. French far-right leader Marine Le Pen criticised the government for making vaccinations mandatory for healthcare staff, who will not be paid after September 15 if they are not jabbed.

"We applauded them at 8pm, considered them our daily heroes, always there despite their low salaries and difficult working conditions," she wrote on Twitter. "Now they're being made to feel guilty and threatened with not being paid, with indecent brutality." Jocelyn Bouyssy, the head of the CGR Cinemas group, told Franceinfo radio that he was "very angry" about the health pass which would be difficult to implement and dissuade people from going out to watch a film. "We're like lambs being led to the slaughter," he said. Health Minister Olivier Veran insisted that the health pass was "not a punishment, it's not blackmail".

"You can carry on working without being vaccinated, taking your children to school without being vaccinated," he told RMC radio. He said the choice was between accepting the new measures, which primarily affect the unvaccinated, or heading for a fourth lockdown, which would hit the whole country. — AFP

Japan says 'sense of crisis' needed over Taiwan

TOKYO: Japan yesterday said US-China tensions over Taiwan are an increasingly urgent issue that threatens regional stability, as the balance of power in Asia shifts between the rival countries. In its annual white paper-a rundown of the most pressing military threats to the country-Japan's defence ministry referred to the tussle over Taiwan in more direct terms than ever before.

Beijing considers Taiwan part of its territory and has ramped up diplomatic, military and economic pressure on the self-governed island in recent years. The United States has reacted to Beijing's pressure campaign with testy words and hardline policies-prompting its ally Japan, which has key trade relationships with both world powers, to eye the situation with caution.

"The overall military balance between China and Taiwan is tilting to China's favour, and the gap appears to be growing year by year," the Japanese document said. "Stabilising the situation surrounding Taiwan is important for Japan's security and the stability of the international community," it added.

"It is necessary that we pay close attention to the situation with a sense of crisis, more than ever

before." The white paper prompted an angry response from Beijing. "Japan has for some time... levelled unreasonable accusations against China's normal national defence construction and military activities, made irresponsible remarks about China's legitimate maritime activities, and exaggerated the so-called China threat," foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said.

Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga's government approved the paper, which also warned that North Korea poses "grave and imminent threats to Japan's security" and criticised China's "insufficient transparency" regarding its military affairs.

Japan has been increasingly vocal about China's maritime expansion and military build-up, publicly protesting the presence of Chinese vessels around disputed islets known as the Senkaku by Tokyo and the Diaoyu by Beijing. But the country also has considerable concerns about the economic impact of irritating Beijing-its number one trading partner-after recent attempts to improve diplomatic ties.

In April, Suga and US President Joe Biden emphasised "the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait". While these words were cautious, it marked the first time a Japanese leader has joined a US president in a statement on Taiwan since the allies separately switched recognition from Taipei to Beijing in the 1970s.

China reacted angrily to remarks made earlier this month by Japan's Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso, who said his country would "have to defend Taiwan" if the island is invaded by Beijing, according to local media. — AFP



QUEZON CITY: In this photo taken on January 25, 2021, members of the Philippine National Police conduct morning exercises outside their office in Quezon City, as part of a fitness programme in the force to combat obesity and weight gain amongst its personnel. — AFP

Philippine police win battle for the bulge after rule dropped

MANILA: Philippine police have won a battle for the bulge after the force dropped a requirement for officers seeking promotion to meet body fat targets, an official document showed yesterday. Expanding waistlines have been a hefty problem among police in the Southeast Asian country for years. A 2019 study showed almost 35 percent of personnel were overweight and nearly 10 percent obese.

Rules introduced at the start of the pandemic by former police chief Debold Sinas — who publicly acknowledged his own efforts to shed kilos through diet and exercise — made it compulsory for the 220,000 members of the force to work out daily and

submit monthly body mass index (BMI) readings.

Officers seeking to rise up the ranks were blocked if they failed to meet BMI targets, said personnel head Major General Rolando Hinanay.

In a memo to his recently appointed boss, the reed-thin police chief General Guillermo Eleazar, Hinanay called for the rule to be suspended.

He argued COVID-19 restrictions had made it difficult for officers to work out and lose weight.

"As a result, many personnel were disqualified for promotion," Hinanay said. Eleazar confirmed to reporters yesterday he had approved the request. Officers are supposed to have a BMI of between 18.5 and 27, depending on their age, to qualify for service. Generally a BMI of between 18.5 and 24.9 is considered a "healthy weight".

A petition filed by disgruntled officers had argued the policy was "detrimental" and "a form of discrimination to personnel who are above normal BMI".

In the past officers have been sent to training camps or assigned to less desirable posts to shame them into losing weight. — AFP

Myanmar junta hits Suu Kyi with more corruption charges

YANGON: Myanmar's junta authorities have slapped more corruption charges on Aung San Suu Kyi, her lawyer said yesterday, adding to an eclectic charge sheet that could see the Nobel laureate jailed for more than a decade.

A mass uprising in Myanmar against the military's February coup has been met with a brutal crackdown that has killed more than 890 civilians, according to a local monitoring group. Suu Kyi, 76, who is under house arrest, is already on trial for sedition, illegally importing walkie talkies and flouting coronavirus restrictions during elections last year her party won in a landslide.

She will face four more charges of corruption, her lawyer Khin Maung Zaw told reporters on Tuesday, adding to those she already faces over claims she illegally accepted \$600,000 in cash and around 11 kilos of gold.



Aung San Suu Kyi

Her legal team has yet to see "the first information reports and other documents", he said, adding that the charges would be heard by a court in the second city of Mandalay from July 22. Tuesday's hearing on charges Suu Kyi violated Covid restrictions was adjourned, as no prosecution witnesses showed up, Khin Maung Zaw said.

On Monday a prosecution witness failed to testify after becoming infected with the coronavirus. Infections are spiking in Myanmar, with the State Administration Council — as the military junta calls itself — reporting more than 5,000 new cases Monday, up from fewer than 50 per day in early May. — AFP

Greece hit with new migrant pushback claim

ATHENS: Tchinda said the longed-for destination of his risky Aegean crossing — the island of Kos — was already tantalisingly in view when Greek vessels halted the boat he was sailing in along with 30 other migrants. "First a navy ship blocked our way, then it was joined by two smaller Zodiac-type boats," the 39-year-old from Cameroon told AFP. "The coastguards were armed and shouted at us to go home," he said in a series of phone interviews conducted between July 1 and 8. A cellphone video shared by the Cameroonian with AFP shows a packed dinghy immobilised by a Greek coastguard patrol boat, with four crew members monitoring the migrants.

A second patrol boat and a third vessel can be seen in the distance. "Stay down and stay calm, for your safety," a Greek coastguard, in a mask and gloves, says, holding a long pole. Next to him, a female coastguard fingers a machine gun. But the migrants, most of them men wearing life jackets, are agitated.

"I am tired," one man shouts back. "Pushback," says another. Tchinda, who declined to give his last name, said he believed the guards "did not dare" to act violently towards the migrants because they saw them filming. But, he said, they made waves to push the dinghy back towards Turkish waters. "Luckily no one fell into the water but it could have been very dangerous," the Cameroonian added. The Turkish coastguard confirmed in a June 11 written statement that it had picked up a boat the previous day shortly before 1:00 p.m. local time. Details on the number of migrants on board, its location and the time chimed with those described by Tchinda. The incident comes amid a series of media and NGO reports in recent months on the forced return of migrants from Greek territory or in Greece's waters to Turkey.

Amnesty International said last month that illegal pushbacks of refugees and migrants to Turkey had become Greece's "de facto" border policy. The Greek government has repeatedly denied the accusations.

Between January 2020 and March 2021, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) documented around 300 reported incidents of illegal expulsions around the Aegean islands and Greece's northeastern Evros land border with Turkey. Several migrant support groups, including the Greek Helsinki Monitor, in May filed a complaint at the European Court of Justice against Frontex, the EU's border monitoring agency. The case was based on testimony from Ange, a young woman from Burundi, who said she and a Congolese minor were assaulted, robbed and detained on their arrival on the Greek island of Lesbos, then abandoned on rafts without a motor, water or food. — AFP