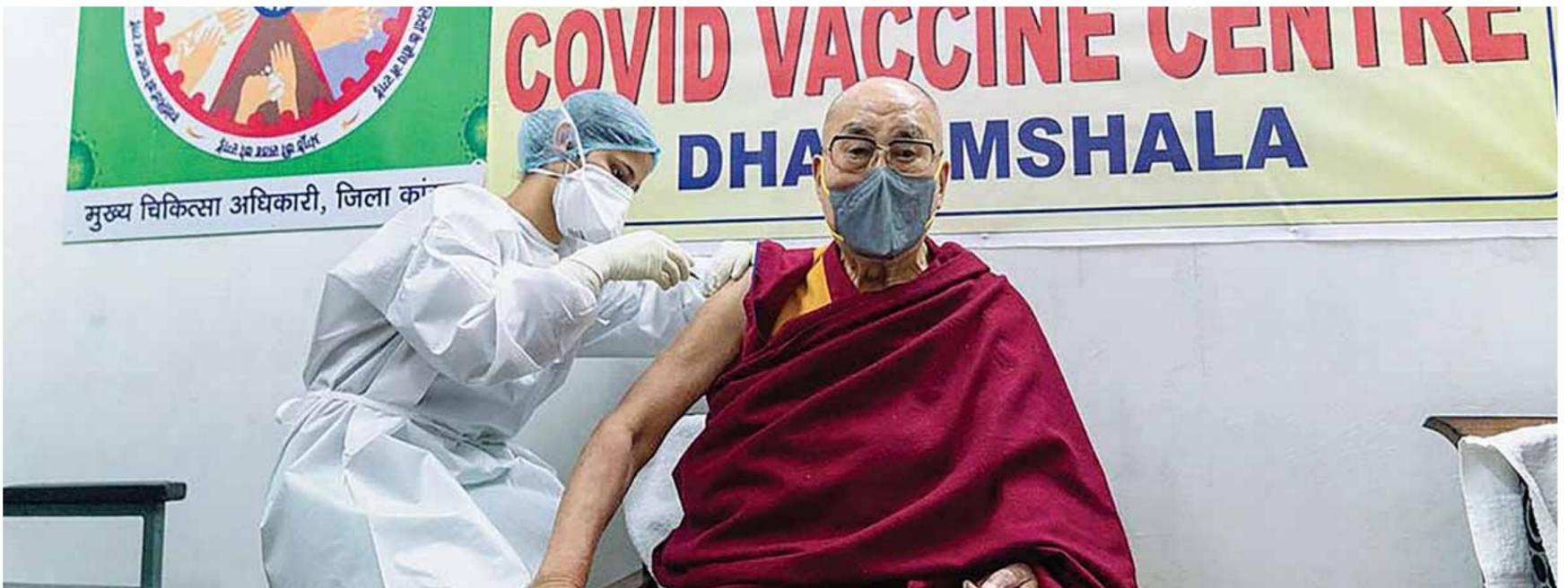




China moves to eliminate Hong Kong opposition

After Floyd killing in US, no sweeping police reform but small, local steps Page 6

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DHARAMSALA, India: Exiled Tibetan spiritual leader Dalai Lama gets inoculated with the COVID-19 vaccine by a health worker at a vaccination center yesterday. —AFP

WHO: Don't waste hope of vaccines

Tedros voices alarm about coronavirus situation in Brazil

GENEVA: Covax will distribute 14.4 million COVID-19 vaccine doses to 31 more countries next week, the WHO said Friday as it warned people not to waste, through complacency, the hope that vaccines bring. The Covax global vaccine-sharing facility shipped more than 20 million doses to 20 countries as the scheme aimed at ensuring poorer nations get access to jabs took off this week.

But the World Health Organization voiced fears that further waves of the coronavirus pandemic could be on the way if people think the roll-out of vaccines around the globe means the crisis is over. "The arrival of vaccine is a moment of great hope. But it potentially also is a moment where we lose concentration," WHO emergencies director Michael Ryan told a press conference.

"I really am very concerned that... we think we're through this. We're not. And countries are going to lurch back into third and fourth surges if we're not careful. We should not waste the hope that vaccines bring... by dropping our guard in other areas."

WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus praised the first full week of the Covax roll-out, but said wealthy countries were nonetheless still leaving others behind in the vaccination rush. Within Africa, Angola, the DR Congo, The Gambia, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mali, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Sudan and Uganda have now received their first doses through Covax. Elsewhere, Cambodia, Colombia, India, Moldova, the Philippines and South Korea have also taken deliveries.

'Mass trauma'

"In the next week, Covax will deliver 14.4 million doses to a further 31 countries. That brings the total number of countries to 51," said Tedros. "This is encouraging progress, but the volume of doses being distributed through Covax is still relatively small." He said the first round of allocations, running until the end of May, only covered between two and three percent of the population in recipient states, "even as other countries make rapid progress towards vaccinating

their entire population within the next few months".

He called for vaccine production to be urgently ramped up, including through linking manufacturers with rival companies that have spare capacity. Tedros also said the planet would be feeling the mental scars from the pandemic for years to come and said the scale of its impact would be worse than during the recovery from World War II.

"The whole world is affected. Each and every individual. That means mass trauma which is beyond proportion. Even bigger than what the world experienced after the Second World War," he said. "And when there is mass trauma it affects communities for many years to come." "Countries have to see it as such and prepare for that. "Mass, mass trauma."

Brazil fears

Meanwhile, Tedros voiced alarm about the coronavirus situation in Brazil, where cases and deaths have shot up, bucking the global trend. He said that in the week beginning November 2, there were

114,000 new cases in Brazil - a figure that hit 374,000 in the week of Feb 22. Tedros said the number of deaths had also shot up from 2,500 to 8,000 over the same time period.

"The situation is very serious and we're very concerned, and the public health measures that Brazil takes should be aggressive while also rolling out vaccines," he said. "Brazil has to take this very, very seriously." He said that because Brazil bordered so many other countries, the situation there threatened the entire South American continent.

Ryan said the P1 variant - which has now been found in 29 countries - had become dominant in Brazil, adding to its woes. He said basic public health measures were still the "best bet" in trying to control case numbers. "Our risk, to an extent, is still in our hands," Ryan said. But he added that it was very hard in countries like Brazil with large urban populations to take measures like physical distancing and mask-wearing "where they don't have the resources to do that without the support of the state". —AFP

4 dead in Senegal after opposition leader held

DAKAR: The Senegal government on Friday vowed to use "all means necessary" to return order after police fired tear gas in clashes with supporters of opposition leader Ousmane Sonko as the interior minister said four people had died. The clashes followed a court ruling that Sonko be held in custody. And following two days of protests, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres urged all sides to avoid any further escalation of the violence.

"The protests must remain peaceful, and the security and police forces must at all times operate... in line with international human rights standards," his spokesman Stephane Dujarric told reporters in New York. "The government regrets the loss of four lives" in events "that are rooted in banditry and insurrection". Interior Minister Antoine Felix Abdoulaye Diome said on television on Friday, accusing Sonko of "issuing calls to violence".

In Dakar's working class district of Medina earlier, hundreds of young people fought running street battles with riot police and smoke rose from burning tires at makeshift barricades in the capital city. Protesters chanted "Free Sonko" on the main Blaise Diagne avenue, the ground strewn with stones, grenade cartridges and burning debris.

"The protests must remain peaceful, and the security

and police forces must at all times operate... in line with international human rights standards," his spokesman Stephane Dujarric told reporters in New York. In Mbao, in the city's outer suburbs, looters also ransacked a French chain Auchan supermarket, an AFP correspondent at the scene said. The chain says least 14 stores have been attacked during this week's unrest.

Tensions high

The arrest of Sonko, popular with young people and seen as a key challenger to President Macky Sall, has sparked the worst unrest in years in a West African state often heralded as a beacon of stability. His supporters had called for further protests to coincide with his hearing before a judge on Friday on charges of disturbing order. "Sonko has been returned to custody over the matter of disturbing public order," attorney Etienne Ndione told reporters after the hearing.

Tensions were high in the city with hefty police deployments in place around the law courts, presidential palace and National Assembly in the heart of the city. Clashes broke out on Wednesday between Sonko's supporters and police as he made his way to court for another case where he faced rape accusations - allegations that he denies.

Sonko was then arrested on charges of disturbing public order, a development that sparked angry protests in the capital and other cities. The custody order issued on Friday, which relates specifically to the public order case, expires today. He was not charged on Friday in the rape case and returns to court tomorrow for questioning over those accusations, his lawyers said.



DAKAR: Protesters fight against gendarmes near their barracks in the Colobane neighborhood in Dakar on Friday during clashes following the arrest of main opposition leader Ousmane Sonko. —AFP

Media targeted

One person died in the southern town of Bignona on Thursday, police said, during clashes there. It was not clear if that death was included in the four revealed by Abdoulaye Diome. Protesters attacked the offices of the government daily Le Soleil and RFM radio station, which belongs to a press group owned by singer and former minister Youssou N'dour. Both media outlets are deemed pro-government.

Sonko, a 46-year-old devout Muslim who is leader of the opposition Pastef party, is popular with many young Senegalese because of his sharp-tongued attacks on the elite, especially President Sall. He came in third to Sall in the 2019 elections. —AFP

Traces of life sought beyond solar system

WASHINGTON: Searching for traces of life on Mars, like NASA is doing, is one thing. But scientists are also looking further afield. Could it be found beyond our solar system? A study published on Thursday in the prestigious journal Science reveals the discovery of a new exoplanet that could be instrumental in the hunt. Researchers will try to determine whether there is an atmosphere on the "super-Earth" and traces of life around a star other than our Sun.

"The end of the road is finding biomarkers or biosignatures in the atmospheres of exoplanets, which is signs of life on habitable Earth-like planets," said Jose Caballero, an astronomer at Spain's Centro de Astrobiologia and one of the co-authors of the study. About 4,000 exoplanets have been discovered during the past 25 years and some have

been found to have an atmosphere.

But these are "gaseous planets or icy planets", Caballero told AFP, and planets the size of Earth have not been investigated yet. The latest discovery opens up the possibility for researchers to study an exoplanet that is "rocky in nature, like the Earth," he said. The name of the exoplanet is Gliese 486b and it is "only" 26 light years away.

It is about 30 percent larger than Earth but with a mass 2.8 times that of our planet and is located in what is called a habitable zone around a star. To identify it, researchers used two methods: "transit photometry" - slight variations in a star's brightness as a planet passes in front of it - and "Doppler radial velocity," which measures the "wobbling" of stars from the gravitational pull of orbiting planets. Since Gliese 486b is very near its star, Gliese 486, it takes only slightly less than 1.5 days to complete an orbit around it. "We surveyed about 350 small red-dwarf stars for signs of low-mass planets," said Trifonov, a researcher with the Max Planck Institute for Astronomy and the lead author of the study involving contributions from five continents.

Trifonov said Gliese 486b is not habitable with



An artistic impression of the surface of the newly discovered hot super-Earth Gliese 486b. —AFP

temperatures ranging around 430 degrees Celsius. "The proximity to the red dwarf Gliese 486 heats the planet significantly, making its landscape hot and dry, interspersed with volcanoes and glowing lava rivers," Trifonov said. At the same time, Caballero said "if our planet has an atmosphere, then any planet at wider separation (from its star), and with roughly the same planet characteristics... will also have an atmosphere." —AFP

Israel's dilemma: To work with ICC probe or not?

JERUSALEM: Israel faces a dilemma: Should it argue its case to International Criminal Court investigators looking into possible war crimes in the Palestinian territories, or refuse to cooperate? Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, a vocal critic of the ICC, declared Israel was "under attack" after prosecutor Fatou Bensouda announced Wednesday she was opening a full-blown probe into the actions of all sides in the 2014 Gaza conflict.

"We will speak the truth in every forum, in every country, on every stage until this outrageous decision is reversed and becomes null and void," he said. The ICC is the world's only permanent war crimes tribunal and was set up in 2002 to try the planet's worst crimes where local courts are unwilling or unable to step in.

It does not try states, but top leaders or warlords alleged to have given the orders. Even presidents have been hauled before the court in The Hague. So in theory it might be possible that Netanyahu or even former defense minister in 2014 Benny Gantz could be targeted in the ICC investigation. Some countries have bridled at moves to investigate top national leaders or warlords allegedly behind war crimes or even genocide.

Under president Donald Trump, the United States imposed sanctions on Bensouda after she separately decided to investigate alleged US war crimes in Afghanistan. Netanyahu's office said Friday that in a call with US Vice President Kamala Harris she had "expressed the American administration's complete opposition to the decision of the prosecutor" to probe the Gaza war. Netanyahu has not made clear whether Israel would fight back through diplomacy and public opinion - or by engaging directly with the ICC, to which Israel is not a party.

There is also a middle path, said Phina Sharvit Baruch, former head of the international law unit of the Israeli Military Advocate General - to provide less than full cooperation, but not a total boycott. "What Israel can do and probably will do is provide the prosecutor with the relevant materials" for its defense, but without formal cooperation because the Jewish state "does not trust this court", she told AFP.

The ICC probe will focus on the 2014 conflict that saw Israel launch a major military operation in Gaza, said to be to stop rocket fire into the Jewish state by the strip's ruling Islamist Hamas movement. An estimated 2,250 Palestinians were killed, mostly civilians, and 74 Israelis, mostly soldiers. —AFP