



United States Department of State

Washington, D.C. 20520

September 26, 2022

Case No. F-2022-04853 / FL-2022-00062

Mr. Gary Ruskin
U.S. Right to Know
4096 Piedmont Avenue, #963
Oakland, CA 94611

Dear Mr. Ruskin:

This letter is in response to your request dated February 11, 2022, under the Freedom of Information Act ("FOIA"), 5 U.S.C. § 552. Thus far, the Department of State has located 10 responsive records subject to the FOIA. Upon review, we have determined all 10 records may be released in part.

An enclosure explains the FOIA exemptions and other grounds for withholding material. Where we have made redactions, the applicable FOIA exemptions are marked on each record. All non-exempt material that is reasonably segregable from the exempt material has been released and is enclosed.

For your information, Congress excluded three discrete categories of law enforcement and national security records from the requirements of the FOIA. *See* 5 U.S.C. 552(c). This response is limited to those records that are subject to the requirements of the FOIA. This is a standard notification that is given to all our requesters and should not be taken as an indication that excluded records do, or do not, exist. To the extent another agency asserts that it can neither confirm nor deny the existence of certain records, the Department of State will similarly take the position that it neither confirms nor denies the existence of those records.

We will keep you informed as your case progresses. If you have any questions, your attorney may contact Assistant United States Attorney, April Seabrook, at April.Seabrook@usdoj.gov or (202) 252-2525. Please refer to the case number, F-2022-04853/FL-2022-00062, and the civil action number, 22-cv-01130, in all correspondence about this case.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Diamonece Hickson", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Diamonece Hickson
Chief, Litigation and Appeals Branch
Office of Information Programs and Services

Enclosures: As stated.

The Freedom of Information Act (5 USC 552)

FOIA Exemptions

- (b)(1) Information specifically authorized by an executive order to be kept secret in the interest of national defense or foreign policy. Executive Order 13526 includes the following classification categories:
- 1.4(a) Military plans, systems, or operations
 - 1.4(b) Foreign government information
 - 1.4(c) Intelligence activities, sources or methods, or cryptology
 - 1.4(d) Foreign relations or foreign activities of the US, including confidential sources
 - 1.4(e) Scientific, technological, or economic matters relating to national security, including defense against transnational terrorism
 - 1.4(f) U.S. Government programs for safeguarding nuclear materials or facilities
 - 1.4(g) Vulnerabilities or capabilities of systems, installations, infrastructures, projects, plans, or protection services relating to US national security, including defense against transnational terrorism
 - 1.4(h) Weapons of mass destruction
- (b)(2) Related solely to the internal personnel rules and practices of an agency
- (b)(3) Specifically exempted from disclosure by statute (other than 5 USC 552), for example:
- | | |
|----------------|---|
| ARMSEXP | Arms Export Control Act, 50a USC 2411(c) |
| CIA PERS/ORG | Central Intelligence Agency Act of 1949, 50 USC 403(g) |
| EXPORT CONTROL | Export Administration Act of 1979, 50 USC App. Sec. 2411(c) |
| FS ACT | Foreign Service Act of 1980, 22 USC 4004 |
| INA | Immigration and Nationality Act, 8 USC 1202(f), Sec. 222(f) |
| IRAN | Iran Claims Settlement Act, Public Law 99-99, Sec. 505 |
- (b)(4) Trade secrets and confidential commercial or financial information
- (b)(5) Interagency or intra-agency communications forming part of the deliberative process, attorney-client privilege, or attorney work product
- (b)(6) Personal privacy information
- (b)(7) Law enforcement information whose disclosure would:
- (A) interfere with enforcement proceedings
 - (B) deprive a person of a fair trial
 - (C) constitute an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy
 - (D) disclose confidential sources
 - (E) disclose investigation techniques
 - (F) endanger life or physical safety of an individual
- (b)(8) Prepared by or for a government agency regulating or supervising financial institutions
- (b)(9) Geological and geophysical information and data, including maps, concerning wells

Other Grounds for Withholding

- NR Material not responsive to a FOIA request excised with the agreement of the requester

From: "Ward, Kenneth D" <(b)(6)@state.gov>
To: Turner, Bruce I <(b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: Wuhan related article ...
Date: Mon, 8 Feb 2021 15:31:26 +0000

We're still missing the origin story of this
pandemic.

China is sitting on the answers.

A Chinese institute must be opened to investigators.

Security personnel keep watch outside the Wuhan Institute of Virology during the visit by the World Health Organization (WHO) team tasked with investigating the origins of the coronavirus disease. (Thomas Peter/Reuters)

Opinion by the Editorial Board

FEBRUARY 5, 2021

WHAT IS China trying to hide about
the origins of the pandemic — and
why?

In Wuhan, a World Health
Organization team has launched its
investigation into the origins of the
virus that has infected 105 million
people worldwide and cost 2.2 million
lives over the past year. The terms of
reference for the investigation say it
will be “open-minded” and “not
excluding any hypothesis” about the
origins of the virus. Many scientists
have speculated that the virus leaped

from animals, such as bats, to humans, perhaps with an intermediate stop in another animal. This kind of zoonotic spillover has occurred before, such as in the West Africa Ebola outbreak in 2014.

But there is another pathway, also plausible, that must be investigated. That is the possibility of a laboratory accident or leak. It could have involved a virus that was improperly disposed of or perhaps infected a laboratory worker who then passed it to others. Wuhan, with a population of 11 million, is a major transportation hub and a center of virus studies in China, with at least six facilities with BSL-3 laboratories for handling infectious agents. Published papers show that some of these institutions have been very active in coronavirus research. The most active is the Wuhan Institute of Virology, where Shi Zhengli leads a research team that has extensively studied and experimented on bat coronaviruses that are very similar to the one that ignited the global pandemic.

Dr. Shi said that when news of the outbreak first became known, she checked her laboratory records to see whether there had been any mishandling of experimental

materials. She also asserted that the genetic sequence of the new coronavirus did not match viruses that her team had sampled from bat caves in China. "That really took a load off my mind," she told Scientific American. "I had not slept a wink for days."

But that must not be the end of the story. China actively covered up the early stages of the pandemic, concealed the transmissibility of the virus from its own people and the world, and punished Wuhan doctors who expressed worry about it in late December 2019. President Xi Jinping did not warn the public in China or abroad until mid-January. Since then, Chinese officials and scientists have advanced a host of dubious theories to suggest the origin of the virus was beyond China's borders: perhaps brought to China by contaminated packaging of frozen food from abroad or from the U.S. military biodefense laboratory at Fort Detrick, Md., or from mink farms. The disinformation only heightens suspicions that China is trying to distract from or conceal something.

Chinese virologist Shi Zhengli, left, is seen inside the P4 laboratory in Wuhan, capital of China's Hubei province in 2017. (Johannes Eisele/AFP via Getty Images)

'Gain of function' research

To find out if there was a leak or laboratory accident at the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) or another lab, investigators would want to carefully examine research done there, including archived lab notes, records of experiments and data, intra-laboratory communications such as email, as well as bat samples, viral strains and all sequences from the WIV collection to compare them with known genetic blueprints from the pandemic virus. This would require transparency and verification of data and sample provenance. But it has not been forthcoming.

It is known from public documents that Dr. Shi was conducting "gain of function" research on bat coronaviruses, which involves modifying their genomes to give the viruses new properties, such as the ability to infect a new host species or transmit from one host to another more easily. Such research is controversial — a gain of function experiment can create a danger that didn't exist before. But the research might also help predict how a virus might evolve toward spillover, enabling the development of effective

countermeasures such as a broad coronavirus vaccine.

The research carried out by Dr. Shi was financed in part over the years by the United States, China and Europe. Grant documents show the work was aimed at determining the potential for spillover of bat coronaviruses from one species to another.

The research involved constructing a series of novel chimeric viruses that would use different spike proteins from some unpublished natural coronaviruses. The ability of the resulting novel viruses to infect human cells in culture, and to infect laboratory animals, was to be tested. This included experiments on mice with cells that are genetically modified to respond as human respiratory cells would.

The WIV also collected thousands of samples from bat caves in China. The work under Dr. Shi was partially funded by the National Institutes of Health through EcoHealth Alliance, a New York-based nongovernmental organization whose president, Peter Daszak, is a member of the WHO virus origin investigating team, and is leading a separate investigation by the Lancet.

A critical database went offline

At the core of Dr. Shi's work is a database at the institute. According to research by DRASTIC, a network of researchers and scientists, this is the most important bat coronavirus database in China. Overall, it holds records of some 22,000 samples and some of their genetic sequences, including for WIV virus sampling trips going back many years. The institute collected more than 15,000 samples from bats, covering over 1,400 bat viruses. The database holds more than 100 unpublished sequences of bat coronaviruses that could significantly help the probe into the origins of the pandemic.

Of particular interest are the full sequences of eight viruses sampled in 2015 in an unidentified location in Yunnan province, which was only recently disclosed. In 2012, six people who were clearing bat feces from an abandoned mine in Yunnan developed an illness with symptoms very similar to covid-19. Three eventually died. The results of the investigation into the cause of their illness have not been fully disclosed. A bat-virus sampling trip by WIV-EcoHealth was underway in nearby locations while these six people were infected. A virus

designated RaTG13 was sampled from the mine in 2013 and has been described as the closest known relative of SARS-CoV-2. Based on limited information about their sequences, the other eight viruses are very similar to RaTG13 and may hold evolutionary clues.

Sender: "Ward, Kenneth D" <(b)(6)@state.gov>

Recipient: Turner, Bruce I <(b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>

From: (b)(6)@state.gov>
(b)(6)@state.gov>;
To: Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>;
Gibbs, Jeffrey J (b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>
(b)(6)@state.gov>;
CC: (b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: WHO Global Study of the Origins of SARS-CoV-2 : " Terms of References for the China Part"
Date: Sun, 20 Dec 2020 23:54:58 +0000

Attached: Full text of the tortuously titled, "WHO-convened Global Study of the Origins of SARS-CoV-2: Terms of References for the China Part" [https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/20200802-tors-chn-and-who-agreed-final-version.pdf?sfvrsn=5323728d_2&download=true]

Of note:

PRC calls the shots: "The final composition of the international team should be agreed by both China and WHO."

The terms of reference seem to go out of their way to not mention the possibility of another lab outbreak while at the same time ironically pointing out:

Current findings show that the virus has been remarkable stable since it was first reported in Wuhan, with sequences well conserved in different countries, suggesting that the virus was well adopted to human transmission from the moment it was first detected. This is also corroborated by the epidemiology and transmission patterns seen since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Two of the genetically closest known coronaviruses, RaTG13 and RmYN02, were discovered in bat populations in Yunnan province of China (Zhou et al. 2020). RaTG13, which was identified in 2013 shares 96.2% sequence homology with SARS-CoV-2 (Zhou et al. 2020, Li W. et al 2005) while RmYN02, has 93.3 % homology. However, with a genome size of about 30,000, the genetic distance between the genetically closest virus, RaTG13, still corresponds to a difference of nearly 1,200 nucleotides, remaining a distant ancestor of SARS-CoV-2

The ToR's statement, "The approach will be open-minded, iterative, not excluding any hypothesis that could contribute to evidence generation and help narrow the focus of research" ring particularly hollow given the choice of the very conflicted and avowedly close-minded Peter Daszak to be on the small team of investigators, to wit:

Democracy Now interview of Peter Daszak 4/16/20:

"...the idea that this virus escaped from a lab is just pure baloney. It's simply not true. I've been working with that lab for 15 years. And the samples collected were collected by me and others in collaboration with our Chinese colleagues. They're some of the best scientists in the world. There was no viral isolate in the lab. There was no cultured virus that's anything related to SARS coronavirus 2. So it's just not possible... These are biosecure labs with very high-tech, sophisticated security systems. Even if you showed all the notebooks, the conspiracy folks would continue to say, "Well, it's a cover-up. Clearly

something happened, and these are doctored notebooks, doctored videotapes. The point is that, let's look at a balance of probability. That's what you have to do. We have a few hundred technicians and scientists working in these labs. They do not have a problem with staff or with security or with loose controls. These are very well-run labs. They've been inspected by the U.S. CDC, by people working in BSL-4 labs, high-security labs, in the U.S., in France and internationally. They're accredited by the U.S. So, it's ironic that now we're saying they're not very well organized. We actually inspected them properly and allowed them to open." [https://www.democracynow.org/2020/4/16/peter_daszak_coronavirus]

Daszak's "The Lancet" correspondence 2/19/20

"The rapid, open, and transparent sharing of data on this outbreak is now being threatened by rumours and misinformation around its origins. We stand together to strongly condemn conspiracy theories suggesting that COVID-19 does not have a natural origin."

[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30418-9/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30418-9/fulltext)]

And as the "Organic Consumers Association" points out in their article, "Scientists Outraged by Peter Daszak Leading Enquiry Into Possible Covid Lab Leak" 9/23/20:

There is also the issue of conflicts of interest. Although Daszak declared in The Lancet that he has "no competing interests" on Covid-19, and likewise told the Washington Post he has "no conflicts of interest", Alina Chan, a molecular biologist at the Broad Institute, points out that he is a "long-time friend, collaborator and funder of the Shi lab" – the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) lab led by Shi Zhengli that is most often identified as the probable source of any lab leak.

In fact, Daszak's EcoHealth Alliance has helped finance both the WIV's bat coronavirus surveillance and its bat coronavirus gain-of-function research (research aimed at making a virus more infective), with the help of multi-million dollar grants from the US government. This, of course, means Daszak's own activities are material to the subject he is investigating: the origins of a bat-derived coronavirus pandemic that broke out in the very city to which he helped lab workers bring bat coronaviruses for storage, analysis and experimentation.

As Richard Ebright has noted, "For persons who were directly involved in funding, promoting, and/or performing bat coronavirus research and bat coronavirus gain-of-function research at WIV, avoiding a possible finding of culpability for triggering a pandemic is a powerful motivator." And Daszak would be at the very top of the list of those involved in funding, promoting and collaborating in that research.

More broadly, as Ebright also notes, Daszak's EcoHealth Alliance has received over \$100 million in funding from US government agencies for a variety of virus surveillance and virus gain of function work – the kind of work that could be brought into serious question if Daszak found any evidence it contributed to causing the pandemic.

How did The Lancet manage to overlook such an enormous conflict of interest, Ebright wonders, while Dr Filippa Lentzos, an expert on biological threats at King's College London, tweeted, "Goodness. I can't imagine a lead investigator with more vested interests!"

Sender: (b)(6)@state.gov>
(b)(6)@state.gov>;
Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>;
Gibbs, Jeffrey J (b)(6)@state.gov>;
Recipient: (b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>

WHO-convened Global Study of the Origins of SARS-CoV-2:

Terms of References for the China Part

31 July 2020

Contents

Background	2
Approach.....	2
Current knowledge supporting origin tracing work.....	3
Phylogenetic work.....	3
Animal susceptibility and animal surveys	4
Persistence of the virus on food and surfaces	4
The early cluster in Wuhan	5
Implementation plan	6
Phase 1: Short term studies	6
a) Descriptive Epidemiological Study.....	6
b) Analytical Epidemiology Study	7
c) Animals, Products and Environmental Study.....	7
Expected outcomes from the Phase 1 studies.....	7
Phase 2: Longer term plans.....	7
Team composition	8
Ways of working	8
References	8

Background

The current COVID-19 pandemic shows the devastating impact emerging zoonotic diseases can have on societies. As the pandemic continues to unfold, understanding how the epidemic began is essential to prevent further SARS-CoV-2 virus introductions and help prevent introductions of new viruses in the future. It could also potentially assist with the development of treatments and vaccines (Zhang Z. et al. 2020). Identifying the origin of the virus, however, is a complex task, which requires strong international and multi-sectoral collaboration, and a commitment to leverage expertise, capacity, and work globally.

In February 2020, WHO convened an international meeting of experts to develop and agree on a number of priority research initiatives in all aspects of COVID-19 which included virus origin, virus persistence and animal susceptibility to SARS-CoV-2 (WHO, 2020a). Under this Research and Development blueprint, WHO is also coordinating several international collaborative efforts that contribute to better understanding the origin of the virus. Furthermore, WHO, the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) agreed through the 73rd World Health Assembly resolution, to galvanize efforts to trace the animal origin of the virus, its route of transmission to humans and possible role of the intermediate host.

Building on the recommendations from the 73rd World Health Assembly, WHO, together with the Government of China, are setting up an international multidisciplinary team to design, support and conduct a series of studies that will contribute to origin tracing work. The work will contribute to improve the understanding of the virus origins, help set up further studies, thereby improving global preparedness and response to SARS-CoV-2 and zoonotic emerging diseases of similar origin. In addition, the international team will also develop study frameworks and materials that may set the ground for origin tracing work elsewhere. The global origin tracing work is therefore not bound to any location and may evolve geographically as evidence is being generated, and hypotheses evolve.

These Terms of References (ToRs) outline the scope of studies, set out the main guiding principles and key expected deliverables for these studies.

Approach

Where an epidemic is first detected does not necessarily reflect where it started. An outbreak of pneumonia of unknown etiology was identified through surveillance in Wuhan, however the possibility that the virus may have silently circulated elsewhere cannot be ruled out. For example, some countries have retrospectively identified cases of COVID-19 weeks before the first case was officially notified through surveillance, and unpublished reports of positive sewage samples could suggest that the virus may have circulated undetected for some time.

The COVID-19 outbreak was first reported in Wuhan, where the SARS-CoV-2 virus was also first identified and characterized. The detection was followed by a rapid exponentially growing outbreak, weeks before other outbreaks were detected elsewhere. Thus, under the framework of global tracing for the origins of SARS-CoV-2, the approach to identifying the source of infection, the source of introduction and possible origins of the virus initially conducted in Wuhan is of importance for further global origin tracing work.

Findings from these initial studies will inform many efforts globally to better understanding the origins of the virus. Ongoing parallel studies, undertaken in a systematic and logical way are essential.

Studies under these ToRs will aim to (i) explore how the circulation of SARS-CoV-2 might have started and (ii) gather evidence from the cluster of cases identified in December 2019 for potential links and

clues as to its origin. Studies to address those points will be addressed in Phase 1 of the work. The result of Phase 1 studies will generate hypotheses that lay the ground for Phase 2 studies, which could be conducted elsewhere in China, in neighboring countries and globally. For example, susceptibility studies have demonstrated that several animal species could potentially play the role of intermediary host. This, combined with evidence from Wuhan, could help better guide future work into intermediary animal species in China and elsewhere.

The approach will be open-minded, iterative, not excluding any hypothesis that could contribute to evidence generation and help narrow the focus of research.

Findings from origin studies in China will advance origins tracing in other countries and may lead to similar work elsewhere. WHO will continue to work closely with the World Health Organization of Animal Health (OIE), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and countries, as part of the One-Health Approach to identify the zoonotic source of the virus and the route of introduction to the human population, as per 73rd WHA resolution.

Current knowledge supporting origin tracing work

Phylogenetic work

Tens of thousands of genome sequences of SARS-CoV-2 have now been shared through GISAID, a public database (<https://gisaid.org>), including sequences of early cases from Wuhan and three environmental samples from the Huanan market at the epicenter of the initial reported cases. Phylogenetic analyses help better understand transmission dynamics, particularly how the virus may have evolved over time and how clusters might be related in time and place. For example, it can help identify whether transmission in a new area is related to one or multiple introductions which, combined with epidemiological data, can strengthen the evidence about how the virus spreads and where it originated from (Oude Munnink et al. 2020)

Current findings show that the virus has been remarkably stable since it was first reported in Wuhan, with sequences well conserved in different countries, suggesting that the virus was well adapted to human transmission from the moment it was first detected. This is also corroborated by the epidemiology and transmission patterns seen since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Two of the genetically closest known coronaviruses, RaTG13 and RmYN02, were discovered in bat populations in Yunnan province of China (Zhou et al. 2020). RaTG13, which was identified in 2013 shares 96.2% sequence homology with SARS-CoV-2 (Zhou et al. 2020, Li W. et al 2005) while RmYN02, has 93.3 % homology. However, with a genome size of about 30,000, the genetic distance between the genetically closest virus, RaTG13, still corresponds to a difference of nearly 1,200 nucleotides, remaining a distant ancestor of SARS-CoV-2.

Bats are natural reservoirs of coronaviruses, and likely harbor many other coronaviruses not yet discovered. However, while direct spillover of a new virus from bats to humans is possible, zoonoses often stem from exposure to intermediate animal hosts. Research conducted in China and elsewhere since the COVID-19 pandemic began has shown that a range of animals – including wild and farmed species – are susceptible to infection, but when and where SARS-CoV-2 spilled over to humans, and from which animal, remains unknown.

A virus with 92.4 percent homology to SARS-CoV-2 was recently discovered in pangolins (Lam et al. 2020), with 97.4 percent homology in the receptor binding domain (RBD) indicating some possible recent similar or related evolution of these viruses (Andersen et al. 2020)

However, to date the specific reservoir has not been identified and there is no evidence to demonstrate the possible route of transmission from a bat reservoir to human through one or several intermediary animal species (WHO 2020, OIE 2020).

Animal susceptibility and animal surveys

As part of the studies conducted to help identify possible intermediary host animal(s) species for SARS-CoV-2, several susceptibility studies on a range of animal species have been performed or are underway. The initial target species have covered animal species known to have ACE2 receptor cells, believed to be the main entry point for SARS-CoV-2 infection in humans. More than 500 animal species have been identified for possible further studies based on predicted ACE2 affinity to bind SARS-CoV-2 receptor binding domain (FAO 2020b).

So far, susceptibility studies conducted in several countries have shown that domestic cats, ferrets, hamsters and minks are particularly susceptible to infection, and in some cases exhibit morbidity and mortality and can transmit the disease to other animals of the same species (FAO, 2020a). Cats have been found to be easily infected with SARS-CoV-2 and can transmit to other cats. Infected cats were also shown to shed viruses in large quantities while asymptomatic (Shi et al., 2020, Halfmann et al. 2020). The possible role of cats was further suggested by a seroprevalence study in Wuhan in which 13.7% of 105 samples taken during the outbreak from both domestic cats with high exposure risk and stray cats were found positive while 39 samples from mid-2019 were all negative (Zhang Q et al. 2020). Other species have shown different degree of susceptibility to SARS-CoV-2 infection including several species of bats, tree shrews, and different species of non-human primates (FAO 2020) while other species such as chicken, turkeys, ducks and quails were found not to be susceptible. Although overexpression of swine ACE2 in cultured cells supports some degree of viral entry (Zhou et al. 2020). Recent experimental work with direct inoculation, however, has demonstrated that pigs are non-susceptible to the virus (Shi et al. 2020). The susceptibility of pigs warrants further studies.

In February and March 2020, the first cases of infection with SARS-CoV-2 were reported in domestic cats and dogs from household of COVID-19 patients in Hong Kong SAR, China and Belgium. Similar cases of pet cats and dogs have since been reported from several countries (OIE 2020). Other felines such as tigers and lions in a zoo in the USA were also found to be infected with SARS-CoV-2 following contact with an infected pre-symptomatic zookeeper.

A number of outbreaks in mink farms in the Netherlands, Denmark and Spain have shown that minks can spread the disease in farm environment and could potentially establish a new animal reservoir in mink populations for SARS-CoV-2 if not efficiently controlled.

These preliminary results demonstrate that different animal species in regular contacts with humans are susceptible to infection with SARS-CoV-2 and could serve as intermediate animal host species or could establish new reservoirs for the virus and new sources for spill-over events into the human population.

Persistence of the virus on food and surfaces

Recent outbreaks in markets as well as food processing plants in USA, Germany, Thailand, India, Brazil, Spain, China and Ireland have raised questions about the potential role of food products as a vehicle of transmission for SARS-CoV-2. Preliminary results from the Xinfadi market outbreak in Beijing suggest that food items, as other surfaces and objects, might be contaminated by the virus. But there is no evidence that contaminated food items may have contributed to transmission. Furthermore, shrimps and salmon packages were found positive for SARS-CoV-2 RNA in recent surveys in China. In experimental studies on the survival of SARS-CoV-2 virus on different surfaces, the virus can remain

viable for up to 72 hours on different surfaces (WHO, 2020c), and recent results further suggest virus viability on meat products (Fisher et al., 2020). However, while this suggests that transmission may occur from contaminated surfaces or items, there is currently no evidence for foodborne transmission.

While there is currently no evidence that food is a likely source or route of transmission for the virus, it is necessary to coordinate and cooperate globally to share data and evidence to further clarify the potential role of food in the spread of COVID-19 virus.

The early cluster in Wuhan

Wuhan is a city with a good surveillance system, and while the outbreak was first identified in Wuhan, it is possible that it started elsewhere and circulated unnoticed. As the information is scarce, there are limited hypotheses about how the outbreak might have started in Wuhan. It may have started from an infected individual contaminated elsewhere, from contact with an infected animal, or less likely through contact with contaminated products.

The early cases in Wuhan are thought to have occurred in early December, and preliminary information from surveillance data of severe pneumonia suggest no unusual cluster or departure from trends in the weeks and months preceding the first reported case in Wuhan.

Retrospective review of cases identified a total of 124 confirmed cases with onset date in December 2019, 119 of whom were from Wuhan and 5 others from Hubei or other provinces, but all with travel links to Wuhan during the period of exposure. A study of 41 initially identified confirmed cases showed that 70% of the cases had a link to the Huanan market (Huang et al, 2020), but detailed exposure factors within the market and elsewhere remain unclear.

The Huanan wholesale market is a large market (653 stalls and more than 1180 employees) mainly supplying seafood products but also fresh fruits and vegetables, meat, and live animals. In late December 2019, 10 stalls operators were trading live wild animals including chipmunks, foxes, racoons, wild boar, giant salamanders, hedgehogs, sika deer, among others. Farmed, wild and domestic animals were also traded at the market including snakes, frogs, quails, bamboo rats, rabbits, crocodiles, and badgers. The market was closed on 1 January 2020, and several investigations followed, including environmental sampling in the market, as well as sampling of frozen animal carcasses at the market. Of the 336 samples collected from animals, none were PCR positive for SARS-CoV-2, whereas 69 out of 842 environmental samples were positive by PCR for SARS-CoV-2. Sixty-one of those (88%) were from the western wing of the market. Of these, 22 samples were from 8 different drains and sewage, and 3 viruses were isolated, sequenced and shared on GISAID. These were virtually identical to the patient samples collected at the same time (>99.9 % homology).

In the absence of analytical epidemiological study among vendors and shoppers, and without detailed mapping of exposure factors at the market over the exposure period, type of products and animals sold, the proportion of animals and commodities that were available for testing, interpreting laboratory sampling results remains difficult.

As such, it remains unclear whether the market was a contamination source, acted as an amplifier for human-to-human transmission, or a combination of those factors. In addition, there is limited information about potential risk factors outside of the market, such as occupation, travel history, or other were identified among the first diagnosed cases. A better understanding of potential risk factors through in-depth epidemiological investigations is critical in orienting the nature and geographic focus of other studies. For example, if the market as acted primarily as a common source of contamination through animal or non-animal products, the focus of subsequent studies should be on

source tracing of such products, whereas if evidence points towards the market as enabler of human-to-human transmission, source tracing would need to focus elsewhere.

No unusual clusters of cases or deaths were reported elsewhere in China prior to detecting the cases in Wuhan, and clinical surveillance of farmed animals since 2019 have shown no departure from trends.

Overall, very little is currently known about how, where and when the virus started circulation in Wuhan. Preliminary studies have not generated credible leads to narrow the area of research, and studies will therefore focus on developing comprehensive study plans to help generate hypotheses on how the outbreak may have started in Wuhan.

Implementation plan

Short term studies (Phase 1) will be conducted to better understand how the virus might have started circulating in Wuhan.

Building on the findings of these short-term studies, and the scientific literature, longer term studies will be developed (Phase 2).

The framework and methodological approaches implemented in China could also be used to study the virus origins elsewhere, if warranted. For example, methods for serological surveys among population groups potentially exposed to animal hosts can be standardized for comparison.

Phase 1: Short term studies

- a) Descriptive Epidemiological Study
 1. In-depth reviews of hospital records for cases compatible with COVID-19 before December. This may include the high resolution-CT images of patients with pneumonia of unknown etiology will be undertaken for any COVID-19-like pneumonia, and stored samples will be tested, if available.
 2. Review of surveillance trends for disease in the months preceding the outbreak to compare to baseline levels of similar months in previous years to identify any departure from expected trend through appropriate statistical analyses. For example, identify departure from trends of pneumonia of unknown origin, or review of syndromic surveillance trends for ILI and SARI, by comparing trends in the second half of 2019 to that of similar periods in previous years.
 3. Review of trends of all-cause mortality, and review death registers for specific causes of death compatible with COVID-19.
 4. In-depth interviews and reviews of currently identified early cases and potentially earlier cases identified through the above described studies regarding to their exposure history. All potential exposure factors will be considered, including travel history, occupational exposure, market exposure, animal contact, characterizes of their social contacts at the time and others. The process will likely be iterative.
 5. Serological studies based on stored blood/serum samples collected in weeks and months before December 2019. Consideration should be given to population group of focus (e.g. groups at higher risk of exposure such as frontline workers, laboratory workers, farm workers). Additionally, the work may include targeted serological testing on stored serum samples of suspect COVID-19 patients and suspect deaths identified through retrospective reviews.

b) Analytical Epidemiology Study

1. Design and undertake a **comprehensive epidemiological study** to test whether specific epidemiological factors are associated with COVID-19 in the early part of the outbreak (for cases reported or retrospectively identified in 2019). The approach will include:
 - a. The development of an appropriate **study design**. Approaches such as case-cohort designs, where exposures among cases are compared to that of a random sample of the population, or variations of that, may be particularly well suited. The design may also include an approach to explore exposures within the Huanan market in more detail.
 - b. **The implementation of the study**. The study will be conducted with highly trained staff, appropriate interpreters, use of electronic data capture tools, and adequate data management and advanced analysis.
2. **Develop additional studies as needed and as informed by 1 and 2 above**. For example, set up serological studies within specific population groups, as informed by abovementioned studies.

c) Animals, Products and Environmental Study

1. **A mapping of activities and items traded** at the Huanan (and potentially other relevant) market(s) in late November and December 2019, including types of animals (captured wild, farmed wild and domestic animals) and stalls (for all types of goods) present at the Huanan market.
2. **Mapping the supply chains for all relevant animals and products, including food products, sold at the Huanan market** and other markets in Wuhan as informed by the results of the epidemiological studies. Supply chains could be local, national or international. Based on current knowledge about animal susceptibility, the team will develop a list of high-risk animals traded at the market, and their supply chains, to develop an animal sampling strategy. This mapping exercise may provide additional clues about possible geographic areas suitable for future animal and human serological surveys.
3. Testing of frozen sewage samples for evidence of circulation prior to December 2019.
4. Other studies and approaches, as appropriate.

Some of the abovementioned work may already be partially done or documented by the time the international team initiates its work, and the study will therefore build on existing information and augment, rather than duplicate, ongoing or existing efforts.

The international team will ensure that the scientific framework developed in China can be applicable and replicated in other settings, should there be a need to do so.

Expected outcomes from the Phase 1 studies

A range of deliverables are expected from the short-term studies. These include:

1. Detailed reports for the various studies.
2. Identification of key knowledge gaps.
3. Formulation of working hypotheses
4. Development of plans for longer term studies, as appropriate

Phase 2: Longer term plans

The international team will develop plans for detailed longer-term studies building on the outcome of the Phase 1 short-term studies and any new relevant national or international scientific evidence generated. These will help better define the scope of the Phase 2 studies, both in terms of their

geographic focus, animal species to look at, and scientific approach, and will support the development of plans for global origin tracing.

These studies may include the following:

- 1) in-depth epidemiologic, virologic, serologic assessments in humans in specific geographic areas or specific settings as informed by the initial short-term studies and other international findings
- 2) in-depth epidemiologic, virologic, serologic studies among animal populations before and after the outbreak (potential hosts and reservoirs) in targeted geographic areas
- 3) more detailed studies, depending on initial results from the short-term studies

Team composition

The international team will provide a wide range of expertise, from China and several other countries, ensuring a breadth of scientific expertise.

The team will include experts in public health and animal health and human-animal interface, epidemiology, virology, genomics, environmental health, food safety, among others, both nationally and internationally, including academia, scientists from government organizations, and scientists at WHO, OIE and FAO.

The final composition of the international team should be agreed by both China and WHO.

Ways of working

A program of work will be developed for the international team to operate as follows:

- The team will initially engage on the development of study protocols, and study materials.
- Regular interaction will be maintained to share scientific findings related to origin tracing from China and elsewhere
- Contribute to the delivery of Phase 1 studies where needed
- Undertake a visit to China of the entire team, at an appropriate time
- Develop longer term study plans (Phase 2).

References

Andersen, K.G., Rambaut, A., Lipkin, W.I. et al. The proximal origin of SARS-CoV-2. *Nat Med* **26**, 450–452 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41591-020-0820-9>

FAO (2020a) El Masry, I., von Dobschuetz, S., Plee et al. 2020. *Exposure of humans or animals to SARS-CoV-2 from wild, livestock, companion and aquatic animals: Qualitative exposure assessment*. FAO animal production and health, Paper 181. Rome, FAO. <https://doi.org/10.4060/ca9959en>

FAO (2020b) El Masry, I., von Dobschuetz, S., Plee, et al. 2020. Exposure of humans or animals to SARS-CoV-2 from wild, livestock, companion and aquatic animals. Supplementary tables on susceptibility of animals to SARS-CoV-2 based on predicted ACE2 affinity to bind SARS-CoV-2 receptor binding domain – July 2020. Supplementary to FAO Animal Production and Health Paper 181. Rome. FAO.

Fisher D. et al (2020) The risk of cross-border movement of SARS-CoV-2 on frozen and refrigerated fish and meat. *JAMA*, *in press*.

Guan Y, Zheng BJ, He YQ, et al. (2003) Isolation and characterization of viruses related to the SARS coronavirus from animals in southern China. *Science*. 2003;302(5643):276-278.
doi:10.1126/science.1087139

Halfmann PJ, Hatta M, Chiba S. (2020) Transmission of SARS-CoV-2 in Domestic Cats. *New England Journal of Medicine*. doi: 10.1056/NEJMc2013400

Huang C, Wang Y, Li X, et al. (2020) Clinical features of patients infected with 2019 novel coronavirus in Wuhan, China [published correction appears in Lancet. 2020 Jan 30;:]. *Lancet*. 2020;395(10223):497-506. doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30183-5

Lam, T T-Y, et al. (2020) Identifying SARS-CoV-2-related coronaviruses in Malayan pangolins. *Nature*. Vol 583, 9 July 2020.

Li H., Mendelsohn E, Zong C et al., (2019) Human-animal interactions and bat coronavirus spillover potential among rural residents in Southern China *Biosafety and Health* 1 84–90
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.bsheal.2019.10.004>

Li W., Shi Z, Yu M, (2005) Bats are Natural Reservoirs for SARS-like Coronaviruses, *Science* 2005: Vol. 310, Issue 5748, pp. 676-679 doi: 10.1126/science.1118391

Oude Munnink B.B., Nieuwenhuijse D, Nieuwenhuijse D.F., Stein, M. et al. ((2020) Rapid SARS-CoV-2 whole-genome sequencing and analysis for informed public health decision-making in the Netherlands. *Nat Med* (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41591-020-0997-y>

OIE, 2020: <https://www.oie.int/en/scientific-expertise/specific-information-and-recommendations/questions-and-answers-on-2019-novel-coronavirus/>

Shi J, Wen Z, Zhong G, et al. (2020) Susceptibility of ferrets, cats, dogs, and other domesticated animals to SARS-coronavirus 2. *Science*. 2020;368(6494):1016-1020. doi:10.1126/science.abb70

Wang N. et al., (2018), Serological evidence of bat SARS-related coronavirus infection in humans, China, *Virol. Sin.* 33 (2018) 104–107. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12250-018-0012-7>.

WHO (2020a) R&D blueprint.

WHO (2020b). Origin of SARS-CoV-2

https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/332197/WHO-2019-nCoV-FAQ-Virus_origin-2020.1-eng.pdf

Zhang Z, Xiao K, Zhang X, Roy A, Shen Y. Emergence of SARS-like coronavirus in China: An update. *J Infect.* 2020;80(5):e28-e29. doi:10.1016/j.jinf.2020.03.010

Zhang Q, Zhang H, Huang K, et al. SARS-CoV-2 neutralizing serum antibodies in cats: a serological investigation. 2020 bioRxiv doi: <https://doi.org/10.1101/2020.04.01.021196>

Zhou, P., Yang, X., Wang, X. et al. A pneumonia outbreak associated with a new coronavirus of probable bat origin. *Nature* 579, 270–273 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-020-2012-7>

From: "Feith, David"
To: Keshap, Atul (b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: Use this version pls
Date: Tue, 12 Jan 2021 16:52:23 +0000

--

David Feith
Deputy Assistant Secretary
Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs (EAP)
U.S. Department of State

(b)(6)

(b)(6)
@state.gov

----- Forwarded message -----

From: (b)(6)@state.gov>
Date: January 11, 2021 at 10:58:48 PM EST
Subject: Re: RE: 11am meeting in 7312
To: Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>
Cc: (b)(6)@state.gov>, Stilwell, David R (b)(6)@state.gov>

Here you go.

From: Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>
Sent: Monday, January 11, 2021 9:38 PM
To: (b)(6)@state.gov>
Cc: (b)(6)@state.gov>; Stilwell, David R (b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: Fwd: RE: 11am meeting in 7312

(b)(6) I worked additional edits this afternoon and sent them below.

Any chance you could work from this one and recirculate to the group?

Sorry for the trouble.

--

David Feith
Deputy Assistant Secretary
Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs (EAP)
U.S. Department of State

(b)(6)

(b)(6)@state.gov

----- Forwarded message -----

From: Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>

Date: January 11, 2021 at 5:18:00 PM EST

Subject: RE: 11am meeting in 7312

To: (b)(6)@state.gov> (b)(6)@state.gov> (b)(6)@state.gov>
(b)(6)@state.gov> (b)(6)@state.gov> (b)(6)@state.gov>
(b)(6)@state.gov>

Cc: (b)(6)@state.gov>, Stilwell, David R (b)(6)@state.gov>, Keshap, Atul (b)(6)@state.gov> (b)(6)@state.gov>

(b)(6) many thanks. Keen to see responses to the S speech.

On COVID declass, attached is an updated doc (b)(5)

(b)(5)

Welcome views on moving this forward. Thanks all.

--

David Feith
Deputy Assistant Secretary
Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs (EAP)
U.S. Department of State

(b)(6)

(b)(6)@state.gov

From: (b)(6)

Sent: Monday, January 11, 2021 2:03 PM

To: Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov> (b)(6)@state.gov> (b)(6)@state.gov>

(b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>

<(b)(6)@state.gov>

Cc: (b)(6)@state.gov>; Stilwell, David R (b)(6)@state.gov>; Keshap, Atul

(b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>

Subject: RE: 11am meeting in 7312

See my edits.

I will be gone for about three hours at the VOA and be back around 5pm.

Cheers!

(b)(6)

(b)(6)

Policy Planning Staff (S/P)
Office of the Secretary of State

(b)(6)

Unclass (b)(6)@state.gov

Class: (b)(6)@state.sgov.gov

JWICS (b)(6)@state.ic.gov

From: Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>

Sent: Monday, January 11, 2021 1:35 PM

To: (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)

(b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>;

(b)(6)@state.gov>

Cc: (b)(6)@state.gov>; Stilwell, David R (b)(6)@state.gov>; Keshap, Atul

(b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>

Subject: RE: 11am meeting in 7312

(b)(6) and team –

Many thanks for the valuable meeting earlier. Please see edited statement attached. It's cut to 949 words and incorporates the edits we discussed (b)(5)

(b)(5)

The one tweak I couldn't make was (b)(6) (about questions vs. declarative sentences), but (b)(6) kindly said he will do some spinning on that.

Appreciate urgent reads.

Thanks.

--

David Feith
Deputy Assistant Secretary
Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs (EAP)
U.S. Department of State

(b)(6)

(b)(6)@state.gov

From: (b)(6)@state.gov>

Sent: Monday, January 11, 2021 10:58 AM

To: Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)

(b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>

(b)(6)@state.gov>; Stilwell, David R (b)(6)@state.gov>; Keshap, Atul

(b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>

Subject: RE: 11am meeting in 7312

I'll be there.

From: Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>

Sent: Monday, January 11, 2021 10:55 AM

To: (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)

(b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>

(b)(6)@state.gov>; Stilwell, David R (b)(6)@state.gov>; Keshap, Atul

(b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>

Subject: 11am meeting in 7312

(b)(6) thanks. And confirming (b)(6) (cc'ed).

EAP will be there a little late, around 1105. Thanks all.

From: Feith, David

Sent: Monday, January 11, 2021 10:20 AM

To: (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>

Cc: (b)(6)@state.gov>; Stilwell, David R (b)(6)@state.gov>; Keshap, Atul

(b)(6)@state.gov>

Subject: RE: WSJ: China Allows WHO Experts in to Investigate Covid-19 Origins

All – I'm meeting (b)(6) at 11am in his office, 7312.

AVC (b)(6) will join too.

(b)(6) – any chance you can join?

Thanks.

From: PA Press Clips <PAPressMediaMonitors@state.gov>

Sent: Monday, January 11, 2021 9:02:01 AM

To: PA Monitoring Group <PAMonitoringGroup@state.gov>

Subject: WSJ: China Allows WHO Experts in to Investigate Covid-19 Origins

China Allows WHO Experts in to Investigate Covid-19 Origins

U.N. agency's top official earlier criticized Beijing for holding up mission

By Chun Han Wong

Updated Jan. 11, 2021

HONG KONG—China has agreed to allow a team of World Health Organization experts to enter the country to investigate the origins of the coronavirus pandemic, days after the United Nations agency's top official criticized Beijing for holding up the mission.

The WHO experts are scheduled to start their mission on Thursday and will be working with Chinese scientists in studying the contagion's origins, China's National Health Commission said in a brief statement on Monday.

A health commission official earlier said the WHO team would be traveling to the central Chinese city of Wuhan, where the coronavirus was first detected and which became the first Covid-19 hot spot.

A WHO spokeswoman said the agency welcomed China's announcement. "We look forward to working closely with our Chinese counterparts on this critical mission to identify the source of the virus and its route of introduction to the human population," she said in an emailed response to queries.

Last week, in a rare rebuke against Beijing, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus voiced disappointment that China still hadn't given permission to the U.N. agency's investigators to enter the country—an unusual sign of tensions between the WHO and one of its most important members.

The WHO has been negotiating with China's government over the past year to get information on how the coronavirus might have first crossed into humans, as well as access to sites in Wuhan.

Answers could help prevent another virus lurking in animals from making a similar leap, epidemiologists say, as well as help clear up questions over how long the virus had been circulating, or which early mutations enabled it to spread and kill more than 1.9 million people world-wide as of Monday.

At a news briefing last week, Dr. Tedros said several scientists on the WHO team started traveling from their home countries last week after Beijing had agreed to allow entry, but the agency was then told Chinese officials hadn't completed the necessary permissions for the team's arrival. Dr. Tedros said Chinese officials have assured him that "China is speeding up the internal procedure" that would allow the mission to begin.

China's Foreign Ministry said last week that Beijing and the WHO were still discussing details such as when the scientists would visit the country.

The WHO rarely criticizes the national governments that fund its budget and elect its leaders, though the agency has at times struggled to get Beijing's cooperation on issues related to the Covid-19 pandemic. In late January of last year, the WHO panel tasked with declaring a public health emergency expressed frustration that epidemiological data sent from China was too imprecise and paltry to act upon.

Sender: "Feith, David"

Recipient: Keshap, Atul (b)(6) @state.gov>

From: "Feith, David"
(b)(6)@state.gov>;
To: (b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>
Buangan, Richard L (b)(6)@state.gov>;
CC: Stilwell, David R (b)(6)@state.gov>;
Atul Keshap (b)(6)@state.gov (b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: Urgent clearance: COVID declass
Date: Wed, 13 Jan 2021 20:48:02 +0000

Colleagues –

Seeking urgent D, P, and T clearance on the attached S statement and fact sheet. You've seen versions before, but we wanted to re-send the latest.

We'd be grateful for clearance by 4:45pm if at all possible.

Thanks much.

--

David Feith
Deputy Assistant Secretary
Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs (EAP)
U.S. Department of State

(b)(6)

(b)(6)@state.gov

(b)(6)

From: (b)(6)@state.gov>
Gibbs, Jeffrey J (b)(6)@state.gov>;
To: (b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: The U.S. Government's Interpretation of The Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention
Date: Mon, 14 Dec 2020 19:36:37 +0000

Jeff,

Playing a little bit of a barracks lawyer here, but I found this analysis of the U.S. Government's Interpretation of The Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention From 2002. (b)(5)

(b)(5)

This is the quote:

Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996

This Act of Congress signed by President Clinton further elaborated the above definitions in the US Criminal Code, specifically expanding it to include bioengineered products. The Act went on to amend the parts of the US Code enacted as a consequence of the Biological Anti-Terrorism Act of 1989 to make sure that the Code contains a comprehensive ban on biological agents and toxins that will apply to any new scientific discoveries.¹⁶ The new definitions now read:

- (1) the term 'biological agent' means any micro-organism, virus, infectious substance, or biological product that may be engineered as a result of biotechnology, or any naturally occurring or bioengineered component of any such microorganism, virus, infectious substance, or biological product, capable of causing -**
- (A) death, disease, or other biological malfunction in a human, an animal, a plant, or another living organism;**
 - (B) deterioration of food, water, equipment, supplies, or material of any kind; or**
 - (C) deleterious alteration of the environment;**

(b)(6)

Acting Director, Office of Verification, Planning, and Outreach
Bureau of Arms Control, Verification and Compliance
U.S. Department of State

(b)(6)

(b)(6) @state.gov

(b)(6)

From: (b)(6)@state.gov>
To: Legal-L-Attorneys-DL <Legal-L-Attorneys-DL@state.gov>
Subject: State Department News Clips (7-29-20)
Date: Wed, 29 Jul 2020 13:12:52 +0000

STATE DEPARTMENT NEWS CLIPS

Prepared for the U.S. Department of State
By TechMIS
www.TechMIS.com

Mobile User Copy

TO: State Department & Staff
DATE: Wednesday, July 29, 2020 5:00 AM ET

Secretary of State

[Australia] Australia tells U.S. it has no intention of injuring important China ties (Reuters)

Department of State News

EU to limit export of 'sensitive' tech in response to Hong Kong security law (Politico)

EU Levels Sanctions Over Hong Kong Security Law, Inching Toward Tough U.S. Stance on China (Wall Street Journal)

[China] China Says It Will Respond 'Firmly and Rationally' to U.S. (Bloomberg)

[China] U.S. to order drastic reduction in Chinese diplomats amid surge in spy cases (Washington Times)

[China] China under Xi has become very aggressive, bullish: Nikki Haley (Yahoo News/PTI)

[China] Top Republican senator fears China could defeat US in the West Pacific (Washington Examiner)

[North Korea] Is North Korea's Covid-19 Vaccine Program a Dangerous Ruse? (Politico)

[Afghanistan] U.S. Withdrawal Opens Way for Terror Alliance in Afghanistan (Bloomberg)

Editorials and Op-eds

How Covid-19 death rates can be dangerously misleading (CNN)

The World's Covid Resurgence (Wall Street Journal)

Face-mask data doubletake (Washington Times)

[China] How to Hold Beijing Accountable for the Coronavirus (Wall Street Journal)

Coronavirus News

Kodak to produce pharmaceutical ingredients with U.S. government loan (Washington Post)

Pfizer Foresees Lasting Demand for Covid-19 Vaccine (Wall Street Journal)

The Trump administration was slow to recognize coronavirus threat from Europe, CDC director admits (CNN)

Global airlines less hopeful on COVID-19 recovery (Reuters)

Trade

Bloomberg New Economy Conversation Series: Saving Global Trade (Bloomberg)

[United Kingdom] U.K. Urged to Act Now to Protect Food Standards in Trade Deals (Bloomberg)

Near East & North Africa

Yemen Factions Accept Saudi Proposal to Implement Peace Deal (Bloomberg)

Yemen's separatists to give up self-rule, push peace deal (AP)

Saudi Arabia proposes new mechanism for stability in Yemen's south (Reuters)

Yemen's STC announces abandonment of self-administration (Reuters)

[Israel] In Israel, first hijab-wearing lawmaker hopes to build bridges (Yahoo News/Christian Science Monitor)

[Saudi Arabia] U.S. Revises Indictment of Ex-Twitter Workers Over Saudi Spying (Bloomberg)

[Saudi Arabia] Hajj Pilgrimage In the Age Of Coronavirus Is Unlike Any Before (Bloomberg)

Europe and Eurasia

[Ireland] A Hong Kong real-estate tycoon wants to build a new city in Ireland for 50,000 emigrants fleeing China's crackdown (Yahoo News/Business Insider)

[Russia] Russian Intelligence Agencies Push Disinformation on Pandemic (New York Times)

[Russia] Russia prepares for worlds first approval of a Covid-19 vaccine by mid-August, but questions remain (CNN)

[United Kingdom] Huawei executives accused of snubbing Commons Defence Committee over 5G (Yahoo News/The Telegraph)

[United Kingdom] UK pension scheme NEST tightens climate change policy (Reuters)

East Asia and Pacific

Deadly land conflicts seen rising as threat from industry grows (Reuters)

Philippines: deadliest country in Asia for land defenders (Yahoo News/AFP)

[Australia] Sydney Declared Virus Hotspot, Triggering State Visitor Ban (Bloomberg)

[Australia] Emergency response team dispatched to Australia coronavirus outbreak (Reuters)

[Australia] Emergency teams sent to tackle Australia's worst virus outbreak in aged homes (Reuters)

[Australia] Australia's Victoria reports nine coronavirus deaths, daily cases dip (Reuters)

[Australia] Australia Fast-Tracks Plan to Send Solar Power to Singapore (Bloomberg)

[China] The Vatican Is Said to Be Hacked From China Before Talks With Beijing (New York Times)

[China] Vatican computers hacked in Chinese espionage effort, cybersecurity firm says (Washington Examiner)

[China] Mystery Seeds Postmarked From China to Be Tested by U.S. Officials (Wall Street Journal)

[China] U.S. Warns Against Planting Mystery Seeds From China (Bloomberg)

[China] USDA issues warning about mysterious packages of seeds (ABC News)

[Hong Kong] FedEx pilots, union call on company to suspend Hong Kong operations (Reuters)

[Hong Kong] China says Hong Kong to suspend crime-related agreements with UK, Canada, Australia (Reuters)

[Hong Kong] Hong Kong warns city on verge of large coronavirus outbreak (Reuters)

[Hong Kong] U.S., U.K. Voice New Concern as Hong Kong Considers Election Delay (Bloomberg)

[Hong Kong] Benny Tai: Hong Kong university fires professor who led protests (Yahoo News/BBC)

[Indonesia] Indonesia launches \$7 bln loan guarantee scheme for "priority" companies (Reuters)

[Japan] Navy P-8 Plane Makes Emergency Landing in Japan Following Compressor Stall (Yahoo News/Military.com)

[Japan] Japan Dodged Surge in Total Fatalities During Peak Virus Month (Bloomberg)

[Japan] Japan's air force faces a 'relentless' burden, imposed by China (CNN)

[Malaysia] Malaysia Police Say There's 'Strong Indication' Jho Low in Macau (Bloomberg)

[New Zealand] New Zealand Plans to Recover Quarantine Costs From Some Citizens (Bloomberg)

[New Zealand] Slave dealer in New Zealand sentenced to 11 years in jail (CNN)

[Philippines] Philippines] Pandemic Strands Hundreds in Stadium (Bloomberg)

[South Korea] South Korea launches safety probe into Tesla vehicles (Reuters)

[Vietnam] Vietnam reports eight more COVID-19 cases linked to Danang outbreak (Reuters)

[Vietnam] Vietnam Warns capital to brace for new COVID-19 Outbreak (Reuters)

South and Central Asia

[India] India's gloomy outlook darkens, recovery path in doubt: Reuters poll (Reuters)

[Pakistan] Pakistan Warned of Fresh Virus Threat as Millions Travel for Eid (Bloomberg)

Western Hemisphere Affairs

[Bolivia] Bolivian worker union marches against election delay as tensions mount (Reuters)

[Brazil] Brazil registers 40,816 confirmed cases of new coronavirus, 921 deaths (Reuters)

[Brazil] Brazil virus payout cuts extreme poverty to least in decades (AP)

[Colombia] Colombia coronavirus quarantine to be extended until Aug 30 (Reuters)

[Ecuador] Hundreds wait hours for coronavirus care in Ecuador capital (AP)

[Ecuador] Ecuador on alert over huge Chinese fishing fleet off Galapagos Islands (Yahoo News/BBC)

[Mexico] Ex-Pemex boss asserts innocence on corruption charges, vows to denounce others (Reuters)

[Venezuela] US warns Venezuela vote will be worse than ever (Yahoo News/AFP)

Sub-Saharan Africa

UN report finds migrants face violence by African officials (AP)

[Tanzania] My Tanzanian family is split over coronavirus' (Yahoo News/BBC)

Network TV News Coverage

Coronavirus Vaccine Trials Begin to See Promising Results (ABC World News Tonight With David Muir)

[Iran] Iranian Military Conducts War Games, Raising Tensions in Persian Gulf (CBS Evening News With Norah O'Donnell)

[Iran] Two US Bases in Middle East Went on High Alert During Iranian Military Exercise (FOX News)

[Russia] Federal Officials Warn Russia Using English Websites to Spread COVID-19 Disinformation (FOX News)

[China] Officials Begin Investigation Into Seeds Sent from China (CBS Evening News With Norah O'Donnell)

Headlines

The Washington Post

The New York Times

The Wall Street Journal

ABC News

CBS News

CNN

Fox News

NBC News

Washington Schedule

President

Vice President

Senate

House of Representatives

Secretary of State

[Australia] Australia tells U.S. it has no intention of injuring important China ties (Reuters)

Reuters [7/28/2020 9:47 PM, David Brunnstrom and Daphne Psaledakis, 4021K, Neutral] The United States and close ally Australia held high-level talks on China and agreed on the need to uphold a rules-based global order, but the Australian foreign minister stressed Canberra's relationship with Beijing was important and it had no intention of hurting it.

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Defense Secretary Mark Esper held two days of talks in Washington with their Australian counterparts, who had flown around the world for the meetings despite the COVID-19 pandemic and face two weeks of quarantine on their return.

At a joint news conference on Tuesday, Pompeo praised Australia for standing up to pressure from China and said Washington and Canberra would continue to work together to reassert the rule of law in the South China Sea, where China has been pressing its claims. That has led to friction with other countries in the region and concerns about freedom of navigation.

Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne said the United States and Australia shared a commitment to the rule of law and had reiterated their commitment to hold countries to account for breaches, such as China's erosion of freedoms in Hong Kong.

She said the two sides had also agreed to form a working group to monitor and respond to harmful disinformation and would look at ways to expand cooperation on infectious diseases, including access to vaccines.

At the same time, she said Australia did not agree on everything with Beijing - or with the United States.

"The relationship that we have with China is important. And we have no intention of injuring it," she said. "But nor do we intend to do things that are contrary to our interests."

She said Australia and the United States had a shared interest in an Asia-Pacific region that was free, prosperous and secure and were broadly aligned on issues, including China.

"We don't agree on everything though. And that's part of a respectful relationship, is part of a relationship that has endured over 100 years of 'mateship.'"

Payne did not elaborate on disagreements with Washington, but said Australia made its own decisions and judgments based on its national interests and security.

Department of State News

EU to limit export of 'sensitive' tech in response to Hong Kong security law (Politico)
Politico [7/28/2020 4:43 PM, Giorgio Leali, Neutral]

The EU will limit the export of "sensitive" equipment that could be used for surveillance in Hong Kong as part of a joint response to China's new "national security" legislation in the region.

EU foreign ministers expressed "grave concern" in conclusions adopted Tuesday, saying the new law restricts fundamental freedoms in Hong Kong, and calling for measures at both the national and EU level to restrict trade, review extradition rules and halt any new negotiations with Hong Kong.

"The purpose of the various measures and of the package as a whole is to express political support for Hong Kong's autonomy under the 'One Country, Two Systems' principle, and solidarity for the people of Hong Kong," the conclusions state.

"The EU is particularly concerned about the extensive erosion of rights and freedoms that were supposed to remain protected until at least 2047; about the lack of safeguards and clarity in the law; and about its extraterritorial provisions."

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said in a tweet that the coordinated response sends a "clear message of solidarity with Hong Kong's people."

Germany's Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, who currently chairs the regular meetings of foreign ministers under his country's Council of the EU presidency, also welcomed the new measures.

"I am glad that we have today reached consensus among EU Foreign Ministers on Council conclusions on Hong Kong," he said in a statement, adding that now member countries "have a common toolbox" to take action.

Maas also noted that his country already took a first step by immediately halting exports of military equipment and so-called dual-use goods to Hong Kong as it already does with China.

With regards to trade, the joint statement proposed "further scrutinising and limiting exports of specific sensitive equipment and technologies for end-use in Hong Kong, in particular where there are grounds to suspect undesirable use relating to internal repression, the interception of internal communications or cybersurveillance."

EU foreign ministers also agreed to consider interventions on visa and migration rules as well as on extradition treaties, as already done by the U.K., Canada and Australia.

The ministers had announced two weeks ago plans for a coordinated response to show support for Hong Kong's autonomy.

"We look at the possibilities to further scrutinize exports of specific and sensitive technologies to Hong Kong," Borrell said at the time, adding that "some member states may already announce national measures as part of this package in the coming days."

The statement comes as China is increasingly coming under fire for its actions in Hong Kong and for reports of forced labor and other human rights abuses in the Xinjiang region.

Earlier on Tuesday, Commission Executive Vice President Valdis Dombrovskis and trade chief Phil Hogan held a videoconference with China's Vice Premier Liu He to discuss trade and economy issues.

"Human rights are not the focus of these meetings in general and particularly today's meeting," a Commission spokesperson said before the end of the videoconference, adding that "there should be no misunderstanding on China's part as to our position on these important issues."

An official statement released after the talks makes no reference to trade or economic measures aimed at sanctioning China for human rights violations and forced labor.

EU Levels Sanctions Over Hong Kong Security Law, Inching Toward Tough U.S. Stance on China (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [7/28/2020 5:32 PM, Laurence Norman and James Marson, Neutral]

The European Union imposed sanctions on China over its treatment of Hong Kong on Tuesday, inching the bloc closer to the Trump administration's more hawkish stance toward Beijing.

The sanctions include limiting exports of equipment China could use for repression and reassessing extradition arrangements in light of Beijing's imposition of a draconian national security law. The U.K., which this year left the EU, recently suspended its extradition treaty with Hong Kong.

EU governments will work to ease visa and asylum opportunities for Hong Kong residents. The EU indicated it could take further steps at the end of the year.

China reacted angrily to the sanctions, with a spokesman for the Chinese mission to the EU telling the bloc "to stop meddling in Hong Kong affairs and China's internal affairs in any way." Hong Kong residents know best if the region's "One Country, Two Systems" oversight is operational and "the vast majority" support the new law, the spokesman said.

"China is firmly against the EU's wrong moves and has made serious representations with the EU side," said the spokesman.

Europe's sanctions come on the same day as EU and Chinese officials held a round of talks on a long-discussed investment agreement that the bloc hopes would give its companies greater and fairer access to the vast market. EU officials have said Beijing's reluctance in those areas endangers ties.

A Chinese statement on the talks said "fruitful results and consensus" were achieved on the investment agreement and other topics.

European Commission Executive Vice President Valdis Dombrovskis said the two sides still "need to address sticking points such as reciprocity in the way our companies are treated."

The EU last year labeled China a “systemic rival” and has since increased screening of Chinese investments. Brussels has warned Beijing that without the investment agreement it won’t sign up to new economic agreements. European businesses, especially German companies, rely on China’s market for profits and growth, so a deep rupture like that between the U.S. and China appears unlikely. European governments differ in posture toward China and even the EU’s office combating foreign disinformation has struggled to adopt a consistent position on China’s aggressive diplomacy.

But in a sign that EU attitudes toward China are shifting closer to those in the U.S., Brussels and Washington recently began talks on creating a new trans-Atlantic channel to coordinate positions on China. EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell proposed the forum last month and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo quickly seized on the idea.

“Once we’re confident that we have a shared understanding of the threat that is posed by the Chinese Communist Party, then we can begin to take action,” Mr. Pompeo said after taking up Mr. Borrell’s proposal. Some European officials worry the EU could become a foil for Washington’s more combative position on China but most believe that the U.S. and Europe share common concerns about Beijing, even though the EU wants to pursue its own policies to address its concerns.

Talks on creating the forum are seen in Brussels as a test of how much trans-Atlantic cooperation is possible on China, in part because the Trump administration has repeatedly criticized Europe over the past three years and imposed tariffs on EU products. Europeans see U.S. recognition that Brussels won’t always follow Washington regarding China as critical to the forum’s success.

Work on the new forum began in earnest last week when Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Philip Reeker, the State Department’s top Europe official, visited Brussels to talk with EU counterparts. Mr. Pompeo said he would like the forum operational in the near future.

Europeans want to keep separate from the trans-Atlantic channel ongoing trans-Atlantic discussions of trade with China and technologies like 5G. They see the forum more as a way to jointly analyze threats posed by China’s increasingly aggressive geopolitical stance and to coordinate responses—not an outright alliance with a unified stance, acting jointly.

Before Mr. Trump took office in 2017, Washington and Brussels routinely discussed such issues, officials on both sides said, so in some ways the channel would resurrect stalled communications.

The EU’s shift on China has been labored, reflecting the 27-country bloc’s consensual approach and the economic stakes for Europe. EU officials have said they don’t want to be drawn into a growing global confrontation between Washington and Beijing.

Coronavirus has hastened Europe’s shift, starting weeks after the pandemic hit in mid-March. The Trump administration had quickly focused blame on China for the spreading the virus but Europe demurred. China’s promotion of its narratives that many European officials felt misrepresented events around the pandemic prompted a rethink in Brussels.

In April, the EU's foreign-policy arm drafted a report on disinformation that implicated China. Beijing pressed for the report to be watered down after part was leaked, according to an internal EU communication.

Ensuing outcry over possible EU self-censorship prompted Brussels to stiffen its position. Last month, the bloc released a plan to counter disinformation that for the first time explicitly named China, marking a significant shift.

"If we have evidence, we should not shy away from naming and shaming," said Vera Jourova, vice president of the European Commission, the bloc's executive body.

China's mission to the EU said: "China is always opposed to the fabrication and dissemination of disinformation by an individual or organization. China is a victim of disinformation."

Disputes surrounding the April disinformation report bared Europe's competing views on China. Some see it as a threat to democracy needing resolute opposition.

"We insist on playing chess with them while they are boxing," said Jakub Kalensky, who used to work on the EU's East Stratcom Task Force countering disinformation and is now at the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab.

Others favor a less confrontational path emphasizing dialogue and promoting economic benefits. But since the April dispute, even Europeans favoring openness have adopted a harder line.

"China overplayed its hand," said an EU official. Beijing's aggressiveness "helped to convince the unconvinced" within the EU, the official said.

While many European officials hope still to walk a line between Washington and Beijing, a growing number warn that China, like Russia before it, is capitalizing on European openness to co-opt decision makers and advance its agenda.

"We should not be helping them to do that," said Monika Richter, a former analyst at the East Stratcom Task Force who recently quit in a dispute over its handling of China in its disinformation reports. "We are hobbled by excessive focus on giving Russia and China a fair hearing."

[China] China Says It Will Respond 'Firmly and Rationally' to U.S. (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [7/28/2020 11:22 PM, Staff, 6400K, Neutral]

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said Beijing would respond "firmly and rationally" to peremptory U.S. acts and called on other countries to resist what he called America's bullying, as bilateral relations hit multi-decade lows.

Wang said that "with the U.S. being so blatant and peremptory, China will respond firmly and rationally," according to a Foreign Ministry statement that cited a Tuesday phone call with his French counterpart Jean-Yves Le Drian. "First, China will take firm

countermeasures against the egregious behaviors that undermine China's legitimate rights and interests. China doesn't stir up trouble and always exercises maximum restraint." The statement didn't elaborate on what the countermeasures might be.

"Tolerating a bully will not keep you safe. It will only let the bully get bolder and act worse," Wang added. "All countries should act to resist any unilateral or hegemonic act and safeguard world peace and development."

The actions of some political factions in the U.S. "have forsaken the most basic sense of propriety" and "breached the very bottom line of international norms," Wang told Le Drian. "Such behavior is stark power politics that can be captured by one word: hegemony."

Bilateral relations have deteriorated to levels China has called the lowest since the two countries established diplomatic ties in 1979. Recent tit-for-tat forced closures of the Chinese consulate in Houston and U.S. mission in Chengdu dragged down markets as the world economy slowly recovers from the coronavirus pandemic.

Wang also held a phone call Tuesday with U.K. Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab, exchanging views on Hong Kong and 5G technology.

"China-U.K. relations are currently encountering obstacles and interference," said Wang, according to a Chinese Foreign Ministry statement about the call. Speaking about 5G technology, he said that "regrettably, the U.K. side, under pressure and coercion from individual countries, has politicized business issues and discriminated against Chinese companies."

According to the Chinese statement Raab said that while there were some current challenges between the U.K. and China, they didn't represent the whole of their bilateral relations. He added that the U.K. did not want a comprehensive "reset" in relations.

Tensions between the two countries have risen in recent weeks after the U.K. banned Huawei Technologies Co. from its fifth generation wireless networks, citing the impact of U.S. sanctions against the Chinese tech giant, and offered a pathway to future citizenship for millions of Hong Kong citizens after Beijing imposed a new national security law on the city.

[China] U.S. to order drastic reduction in Chinese diplomats amid surge in spy cases (Washington Times)

Washington Times [7/28/2020 3:12 PM, Bill Gertz, 459K, Neutral]

The Trump administration is preparing to order China to sharply reduce the number of diplomats posted in the United States to levels equal to the number of American diplomats stationed in China, senior State Department officials said.

The action seeks in part to reduce the burden on FBI counterintelligence agents, who in recent months have devoted 2,000 special agents to catching Chinese spies and their agents, the senior official said. FBI Director Christopher A. Wray said recently that the bureau is opening a new Chinese-related case on average every 10 hours.

"By Aug. 1, we want reciprocal levels and access" for U.S. diplomats abroad, said one senior U.S. official, who spoke on background in advance of the formal announcement expected this week.

U.S. and Chinese officials were negotiating the equal diplomatic levels last week, the official said, in the wake of the U.S. closure of the Chinese Consulate in Houston and Beijing's retaliatory closure of the U.S. Consulate in the western city of Chengdu.

Mr. Wray noted in a July 7 speech that "of the nearly 5,000 active FBI counterintelligence cases currently underway across the country, almost half are related to China." Prime targets, he said, were U.S. health care organizations, pharmaceutical companies and academic institutions working on COVID-19 research.

The number of Chinese diplomats in the United States could not be learned. The State Department's most recent list shows 245 diplomats attached to the Chinese Embassy in Washington.

Scores of additional Chinese diplomats are posted at consulates in New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago and, until Friday, in Houston.

The number of American diplomats in China is believed to be more than 200, posted to the U.S. Embassy in Beijing and consulates in Guangzhou, Shanghai, Shenyang, Wuhan and, until this week, in Chengdu.

The Wuhan consulate is the smallest. Since the COVID-19 pandemic originated in the city, the consulate has been staffed with a small diplomatic team. The State Department was prepared to close the Wuhan consulate before ordering the Chinese Consulate in Houston closed, officials said.

The U.S. Embassy in Beijing is one of the largest American diplomatic posts overseas. It includes officials from the State Department, the CIA, the FBI and the Commerce Department.

U.S. officials said the cuts in Chinese diplomatic representation were also motivated by China's refusal this month to allow reentry for dozens of American diplomats who left during the worst of the COVID-19 outbreak. That diplomatic row was related to Chinese testing and quarantine demands.

The pursuit of equal diplomatic levels is part of the Trump administration's broader reciprocity approach, which seeks fair and equitable relations with Beijing across a variety of fields.

"The State Department at every level, all across the world, has engaged with our Chinese counterparts simply to demand fairness and reciprocity," Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in speech in California last week.

In contrast to what officials said is the mistreatment of American diplomats, Chinese diplomats in the United States have been allowed relatively unfettered access to U.S. officials and news media.

In response to the unfair treatment, the State Department in October required Chinese diplomats to provide notification for all meetings with local officials — something that does not restrict their access to those officials.

China's official press sharply condemned the closing of the Houston consulate and said Trump administration officials failed to provide any evidence in public for the espionage charges. A "reality check" published by China's Xinhua News Agency said the "real aim of the U.S. decision was to deflect people's attention from the U.S. administration's poor handling of COVID-19."

Asked about any pending reductions in Chinese diplomats the U.S., a State Department spokeswoman declined to comment.

Tense standoff

The plan to cut Chinese diplomatic personnel follows a tense standoff at the Chinese Consulate in Houston last week.

Firefighters were called to the compound after consulate employees began burning documents in a courtyard July 21. The document destruction was the first indication that the facility had been ordered to close.

China's government retaliated by ordering the closure of the U.S. Consulate in Chengdu, the third-largest city in southern China. All 19 diplomats posted to the U.S. Consulate in Chengdu have left, the senior official said. Chinese media showed a large group of local residents watching the handover.

According to the senior officials, Beijing initially refused to comply with a U.S. demand to vacate the Houston consulate by Friday and tried to negotiate a deal with the United States for continued access to the facility.

The FBI was "ready to go" and forcibly remove all Chinese personnel from the facility if the Chinese government failed to move out on time.

Chinese officials were given several hours after the Friday deadline to leave the facility, and the FBI did not need to use force. However, agents entered the building after the eviction.

Tracking the spies

Kenneth deGraffenreid, a former deputy national counterintelligence executive and a senior counterspy official, said cuts in the number of Chinese diplomats are justified to combat Beijing's spying operations in the U.S.

"At least since the 1980s, counterintelligence professionals and other national security experts have realized that the large number of Chinese intelligence officers operating in the United States under diplomatic cover simply overwhelms our relatively modest counterintelligence capabilities," Mr. deGraffenreid said.

Reductions in the number of Chinese diplomatic personnel in the country are "long overdue," he added.

"But even this move to somewhat 'level the operational field' still leaves scores of thousands of Chinese students in the U.S., some of whom are used by [China's intelligence service] to spy."

Former State Department official John Tkacik said Chinese consular missions in the United States "are staffed primarily by capable intelligence and [Communist] Party propaganda officers who avail themselves of their unfettered access to all sectors of American society."

"The sheer number of Chinese consular officials and their frenetic op-tempo have overwhelmed FBI field offices, which have sole jurisdiction for domestic U.S. counterintelligence yet possess few language-qualified special agents and have limited monitoring/surveillance resources," Mr. Tkacik said.

Mr. Tkacik, a China expert, said U.S. consulates in China are staffed by Foreign Service officers, American dependents of diplomats, and local clerical staff often trained by the Ministry of State Security (MSS), the civilian spy agency.

The consulate in Chengdu was the scene of a tense internal standoff in 2012 after a senior Chinese Communist Party official, Wang Lijun, attempted to defect and sought refuge at the consulate.

After his defection became public, Bo Xilai, China's regional party leader and Mr. Wang's boss, dispatched People's Armed Police armored units to surround the consulate. The backlash from the incident led to Mr. Bo's fall from power.

Hillary Clinton, who was secretary of state, defended the decision to return Mr. Wang to Beijing authorities. She told a Chinese television interviewer at the time that "he did not fit any of the categories for the United States giving him asylum." Mr. Wang had been accused of corruption and violating human rights.

Mrs. Clinton said the defector was returned discreetly to avoid embarrassing Beijing authorities.

Critics of the decision to give up Mr. Wang said many important defectors had unsavory backgrounds and that the U.S. lost a valuable source of intelligence on the inner workings of the CCP.

Mr. Tkacik said the mishandling of the defection was a "cosmic screw-up" by consulate staff and was likely compromised by MSS agents working inside the facility.

"In China, American consular mission officials had no direct access anywhere in local government, academia, churches, social or labor organizations, news or propaganda organs," he said.

Meetings with Chinese businesses also are subject to veto by the Provincial Foreign Affairs Office.

"We never, ever, had permission to meet with the Communist Party, except once we met with Fuzhou CCP Secretary Xi Jinping in June 1991. I gather it remains so unto this day," said Mr. Tkacik, who was posted in Guangzhou in the 1990s.

Chinese consular missions in the United States, in sharp contrast, have been secured against U.S. counterintelligence monitoring and their diplomats have unfettered access to all aspects of society, except perhaps military bases, he said.

Mr. Tkacik estimates that larger consulates could host 30 U.S. diplomats.

In October, a senior State Department official told reporters that Chinese diplomats stationed in the United States "are able to take full advantage of our open society to meet with a whole range of Americans."

Leveling the playing field

The State Department has been complaining about the limits on its diplomats for years, but China's government had not taken any steps to provide greater access.

"Unfortunately, in China, U.S. diplomats do not have unfettered access to a range of folks that are important for us to do our job there," the official said. "That includes local and provincial-level officials, academic institutions, research institutes and so on."

The official said the coming U.S. actions would "go some ways toward leveling the playing field" but "we would like to have much greater access for our diplomats in China."

"Our goal is to get the Chinese authorities to allow our diplomats in China to engage with provincial and local leaders, Chinese universities, and other educational and research institutes freely, the same way that the Chinese diplomats are able to do here," the official said.

A report to Congress said the Chinese have severely restricted access by U.S. diplomats and journalists to Tibet, a region occupied by Chinese military forces in the 1950s.

The Chinese Consulate in San Francisco briefly sheltered a Chinese military researcher, Juan Tang, who was sought by the FBI for failing disclose her ties to the People's Liberation Army. The University of California student was arrested Thursday at a location outside the consulate.

An intelligence official told reporters last week that Chinese activities at the consulate were "particularly aggressive and particularly successful."

China has been using its diplomatic outposts to conduct illegal operations that employ what the FBI calls "fox hunt" teams — groups of Chinese agents who harass and intimidate Chinese dissidents and others whom the regime perceives to be threats.

[China] China under Xi has become very aggressive, bullish: Nikki Haley (Yahoo News/PTI)

Yahoo News/PTI [7/28/2020 9:50 PM, Lalit K Jha, 4021K, Neutral]

China under President Xi Jinping has become more aggressive and bullish, former US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley said on Tuesday, asserting that such a behavior is unlikely to last long.

Indian-American Haley, in an interview to Fox News, said the Chinese were quiet and strategic during her tenure at the UN. They moved and made sure that they were trying to get positions in certain areas, and trying to get things done behind closed doors, she said.

'Then once President Xi kind of named himself king, they got very aggressive. They got very bullish. They started to kind of point their fingers in countries' faces saying, you'd better vote with us. They started to be very aggressive at the UN in wanting positions and wanting to have leadership roles. And they started talking down to everyone,' Haley alleged.

With their Belt and Road initiative, the Chinese started really trying to buy up these infrastructures or partnering with smaller countries on infrastructure projects, she said.

'But yet they go in, they wouldn't assimilate with the countries. The countries didn't like their attitude when they were coming in. Now we look at it, it's getting more aggressive in tone,' said Haley, who resigned as UN ambassador in 2018 after nearly two years in the post.

'But this can't last. You know, any country that is not letting its people be free, there will be a time when the people rebel. So right now they're continuing to push, they're continuing to put pressure on Hong Kong, as we've seen. We're starting to see the pressure go to Taiwan, the South China Sea, in India. All of this is them playing kind of a king of the mountain scenario,' Haley said.

She said the US needs to 'let them know we're on to them, we need to actually follow through on the intellectual property measures that were in that trade deal that we had and hold them accountable'.

'We need to make sure we continue to let them know we're building up our military so that they know not to mess with us. We need to make sure that our American companies understand that when you do business in China, you are required to work with the Chinese military. That is a national security threat to America. And we really need to have those conversations with those Americans,' Haley said in response to a question.

Supporting President Donald Trump's decision to close the Chinese consulate in Houston, Haley alleged that these consulates have been 'spy centres' for a long time.

'I mean there's no question that they had some illegal activity going on in those consulates. So I was thrilled to see them close down the one in Houston, which was known to be kind of the epicentre of where all of this was going on. And I think, you know, when you have Chinese officials being hidden at consulates, it goes to show you're doing something wrong,' she said.

'This is where we really have to crack down on the spying. Whether it's the intellectual

property, whether it's the theft that they're trying to do with our research with the vaccine and with what's going on with the coronavirus, we have to really start cracking down. I was glad to see them do that,' Haley said.

[China] Top Republican senator fears China could defeat US in the West Pacific (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [7/28/2020 11:00 PM, Joel Gehrke, Neutral]

American forces deployed to the Pacific are "highly vulnerable" to attacks from China, according to a senior GOP lawmaker who fears that Beijing could instigate and win a conflict with the United States.

"The first thing that you'd have to do with certain pieces of our equipment is leave the area if China were to escalate this way," said Colorado Sen. Cory Gardner, the top Republican on the Foreign Relations subcommittee for East Asia and the Pacific. "That's not exactly a position of strength," he said in an interview with the Washington Examiner.

What equipment does he have in mind? "The Navy," he replied. "You would basically end up in a situation where all of our planning, all of our equipment, all of our systems basically vacate."

That dynamic has been brought about in large part by the ballistic missiles that the People's Liberation Army have designed to target surface warships such as American craft carriers as well as U.S. military bases throughout the Indo-Pacific. China's tactical advantages in the region are "alarming," he acknowledged, especially when considered in light of Beijing's increasing belligerence.

Some allies remain confident in the U.S. military's strength with respect to China, in part due to the lethality of American bombers and the advantages provided by American submarines.

"If there was a wartime scenario, I'm sure there would be a U.S. response that would blow anything else that the Chinese have in the region out of the water as well," an Asian official said.

Yet Gardner suggested that Pentagon strategists are reduced to ensuring that the U.S. could make any conflict with China very painful for Beijing — a far cry from the sure defeat that awaited any national military that struck American troops in recent decades.

"They obviously don't want to challenge the United States at this point because they know our capabilities would be exacting as well — although our concern would be how long we could stand with it" and continue the fight, Gardner said.

Gardner is far from a lone voice in airing these misgivings. He is one of four GOP senators, including Senate Foreign Relations Chairman James Risch of Idaho, who have coauthored the Strategic Act — a bill that, among other things, warns that China's military now "presents a substantial and imminent risk to the security of the United States" because American forces throughout the Indo-Pacific "are highly vulnerable" to China's missile forces.

"What if China were to decide to make a move on Taiwan today? What if they were to decide to make a move on the Philippines today?" Gardner asked. "What would the U.S. response be? And I'll be — I don't know that there is a good answer that would satisfy the leadership of the United States."

A prospective Chinese invasion of Taiwan, the last refuge of the government overthrown during the Chinese Communist revolution of 1949, is the most troubling scenario for U.S. strategists. The location of that island — off the east coast of China, south of Japan and the Korean Peninsula but north of the Philippines — means that a mainland Chinese victory there would allow Beijing "to project power ... to United States territory, such as Guam and Hawaii" while threatening the neighboring U.S. allies, the senators wrote in the new legislation.

"This shift in the regional military balance and erosion of conventional deterrence in the Indo-Pacific region ... could embolden the PRC to take actions to change the status quo before the United States can mount an effective response," the bill says, using the customary acronym for the People's Republic of China.

The legislation proposes to remedy that situation by coordinating with allies and "adopting a more dispersed force posture throughout the region," with an emphasis on "mobile and relocatable launchers for long-range cruise, ballistic, and hypersonic weapons." Such an arsenal would make it harder for China to win a conflict by blanketing a few large bases with missiles.

"If we're serious about it, we can do that now," Gardner said when asked how long it would take to strengthen the U.S. military presence. "If we're serious about it, that is not a lengthy period of time."

Until that shift takes place, however, China will retain the option of imposing its will on U.S. allies — for a price, but a smaller price than any American adversary would have had to pay in decades. "It would not be without cost to take any kind of action if China were to decide to do that," Gardner said. "But would that cost ultimately mean their defeat? I don't know that we can say that right now."

[North Korea] Is North Korea's Covid-19 Vaccine Program a Dangerous Ruse? (Politico)

Politico [7/28/2020 7:55 PM, Elizabeth Ralph, 2751K, Neutral]

North Korea recently surprised the world by announcing it is developing a Covid-19 vaccine, joining a high-stakes race to show off its scientific chops. But experts increasingly believe the famously secretive Kim Jong Un could also have a more nefarious goal in mind: Using the humanitarian crisis to beef up his biological weapons arsenal.

North Korea "could use this legitimate vaccine aspiration as a way to enhance their biotechnology capability," says Andrew Weber, who was assistant secretary of Defense for nuclear, chemical and biological defense programs during the Obama administration. "They could buy equipment from Western or Chinese sources that would be necessary for their vaccine effort, and then next year they could turn around and use it to produce biological

weapons.”

The pandemic, he and other experts say, presents a unique opportunity for the regime, whose imports are normally hampered by international sanctions.

“Anything coronavirus-related is going to be viewed as humanitarian and humanitarian things are not prohibited by sanctions,” says Bruce Bennett, a defense researcher at the RAND Corporation. “You have to get item by item approval, but there have been lots of humanitarian shipments going” into North Korea. “Lots of stuff could be flowing in that.”

The fears highlight a longstanding concern in the biotech world, where much of the technology and knowledge is inherently dual-use—as good for killing as for healing. The fermenters used to manufacture certain vaccines, for example, can also be used to produce anthrax. Genetic modification builds vaccines, as well as novel, lethal pathogens. Aerosolized drug delivery can send a medicine deeper into the lungs—or shoot a deadly agent through a ventilation system.

Of the 16 countries suspected of having bio arms—including Russia, China and Iran, all of which are pursuing coronavirus vaccine research—Weber has always been most worried about North Korea, which has a history of ignoring international weapons agreements and blurring the line between military and civilian research. “I think they’re more likely to use a biological weapon against us than a nuclear weapon,” he says. “They could easily ... launch a bio attack in New York City if they choose to. ... You’d only need small amounts to kill thousands, tens of thousands of people.”

Now, he believes Covid-19 is a chance for North Korea to build newer, better technology—and perhaps even to learn how to develop a coronavirus-like disease that would resist a vaccine.

Bennett agrees. “North Korea could be looking for something that nobody else has a vaccine to counter, so they would be doing vaccine work in part to understand how the vaccines could be working on the Covid virus, and what they could do to make something more effective,” he says.

That makes this a moment to take North Korea’s biotech sector seriously, rather than dismiss the vaccine bid as mere agitprop from the “hermit kingdom,” say these North Korea watchers. It’s easy to find recent reports describing North Korea’s “dilapidated” health care system, which has to import vaccines for basic illnesses. But Kee Park, a lecturer on global health and social medicine at Harvard Medical School and the director of the North Korea Program at the Korean American Medical Association, insists that, despite their country’s poverty, North Korean scientists are capable of the advanced genetic modification necessary to create a Covid-19 vaccine.

“People dismiss North Korea, say, ‘Oh, they can’t do that.’ But look where it got us with the [nuclear] weapons program,” says Park, who has traveled to North Korea over 20 times and attended North Korean medical conferences. “They surprised everyone. Dismissing out of hand I think is a mistake.”

While Park doesn’t think that bioweapons are the goal in this case, Weber points out that it’s

impossible to know.

"That's the beauty of biological weapons," says Obama's former adviser. "They can hide it within a legitimate biotechnology sector." The world might not find out what North Korea has been using its Covid-19 research for until it's too late.

According to North Korean defectors and U.S. intelligence analyses, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea has had a bio-arms operation since the 1960s. As early as 1993, Russian intelligence reported that North Korea was conducting military research with anthrax, cholera, bubonic plague and smallpox. In 2002, former Trump national security adviser John Bolton, then serving as undersecretary of State for arms control and international security, said "the U.S. government believes that North Korea has one of the most robust offensive bioweapons programs on Earth."

Around 2010, while Weber was serving as U.S. bioweapons chief for President Barack Obama, he says new intelligence confirmed just how advanced the North Korean program was—"and also, how vulnerable our forces and the South Korean population was to a covert biological weapons attack."

The administration was so concerned that in 2011, it launched a program of exercises with South Korea to plan for an outbreak on the peninsula, practicing quarantining and disease tracking and improving connections between South Korea's CDC and military, Weber recalls. "I think the result of those exercises was South Korea doing a great job of handling the coronavirus pandemic."

Some argue that the apparently advanced state of North Korea's bioweapons program means that technology gained from Covid-19 isn't really going to change anything.

"That horse is out the barn door," says Joshua Pollack, editor of the Nonproliferation Review and a senior research associate at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, recalling the 2015 state-released photos of Kim, DPRK's now-36-year-old leader, touring a glossy, newly completed biotechnical complex.

"It had brand new, fancy imported equipment, everything you would need to make anthrax except for the safety equipment, which has been seen at other facilities," Pollack says. "They would seem to have no fatal difficulty overcoming export controls and sanctions that forbid dual-use technology from going into the country. ... We're so far past the ability to control this stuff."

One scholar concluded, based on the 2015 photo op, that North Korea had obtained the equipment by evading sanctions through front companies and money laundering, or on the black market.

But those dodges might not even be necessary in the Covid-19 era, Weber maintains, if export control restrictions are relaxed for the global health crisis.

Typically, shipments of biotech equipment to North Korea are restricted according to United Nations sanctions rules. If a country wants to allow one of its companies to sell technology to North Korea for humanitarian reasons, the request goes through a humanitarian

exemption process, managed by a specific U.N. committee, says Peter Harrell, who was deputy assistant secretary for counter threat finance and sanctions in the State Department's Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs from 2012 to 2014.

Some countries are also governed by the rules of the Australia Group, whose 41 members, including the U.S., Britain and Japan, have all agreed to control exports that could be used for biological weapons. (China is not a member of the forum but has its own similar controls.)

When it comes to export controls, "a lot depends on the end user in North Korea and the purpose ... [the equipment is] going to be used for," says Weber. And some might see the Covid-19 as a time to lower the bar. "The humanitarian impulses are so strong due to the pandemic that it will override any concern about indirectly contributing to North Korea's illegal bioweapons program," he says. "This is a perfect opportunity to import technology."

Harrell is more skeptical. "I think at the end of the day if the U.S. had any concern that the equipment might be used for bioweapons, the U.S. would veto the approval [in the U.N. sanctions committee], even in the face of some criticism," he says.

Kim's regime could be also looking for more than just equipment. The Covid-19 vaccine race—in which laboratories around the world are experimenting with brand new vaccine technologies at a speed never seen before—is an opportunity for North Korean scientists, who often read Western medical studies and replicate them, to gain precious knowledge.

"There are traditional vaccines and then there are some new technologies that are coming on like the mRNA vaccines," Weber says. "[North Korea] could pursue not just the traditional approaches, but some of the more modern approaches that employ genetic sequencing. ... I'm not saying that the driver isn't a legitimate interest in having a vaccine, but [bioweapons are] a collateral benefit."

Most rogue regimes aim to mirror the Soviet Union's biological weapons program, says Bennett, where the aim was "to develop weapons for which there is no counter ... no vaccine, no treatment." Today, he fears, "North Korea could be looking for [a pathogen] that nobody else has a vaccine to counter. So they would be doing vaccine work in part to understand how the vaccines could be working on the Covid virus, and what they could do to make something more effective."

Scientist Robert Duane Shelton, who has studied science and technology coming out of North Korea, says a Covid-19-like virus could be a doomsday weapon for a small country. "It's inexpensive to make. It could be released against your enemies and, since you know what the virus is, you could have developed the vaccine long ago and even immunized your army and maybe your whole population against it."

In interviews, analysts broadly agreed that, while it's impossible to know for sure, North Korea has likely seen cases of Covid-19 but suffered no major outbreak. (Publicly, the country insisted it had no cases until earlier this week, when state media said a defector who returned from South Korea was displaying Covid-19-like symptoms.) This state of affairs would be due to the extreme measures the state took very early to contain the virus, from shutting down its borders to quarantining more than 25,000 people.

But North Korea still needs a vaccine—both to reopen its struggling economy and protect its people from an outbreak that could ravage the country. Rather than rely on foreign countries to shell out precious and potentially expensive doses, why not try to make one? (North Korea's official state ideology, Juche, means "self-reliance.") "The North Korean strategy is clear," says Harvard Medical School's Park. "They recognize if there is a major outbreak, [their] hospitals are not equipped to handle a surge."

"Weapons should not be our first thought here," says Pollack. "This is about the economy. This is about delivering on Kim Jong Un's promises to boost the economy, which is in a sorry state right now."

Another possible goal: profit. Margaret Kosal, a professor at Georgia Tech's Sam Nunn School of International Affairs, points to North Korea's history of creating counterfeit medications to sell in developing countries—medicines that generally look similar to the real thing but don't necessarily work. The North Koreans "are some of the best at counterfeiting drugs," she says. "They were some of the first producers of fake Viagra."

Andrei Lankov, a specialist in Korean studies and director of Korea Risk Group, says he doesn't think a working vaccine is going to come out of North Korea—its biotech industry just doesn't have the talent and resources. The vaccine announcement, he believes, is mostly about Kim looking strong and powerful.

"Recently, they have done a lot of things which were reasonably irrational just because the leader said it should be done," he says.

As for whether Kim could be using this as a chance to build up his country's bioweapons program, Lankov doesn't think so, stressing that what we know about North Korea's bio arms operation is mostly "rumors" and that biological weapons are a poor substitute for nuclear ones. "Should they worry about this when they have a world-level nuclear program?" he asks. "If you have a motorcycle, why should you spend a lot of time building a bicycle?"

But others say that's the whole point: Bioweapons are subtle, conferring plausible deniability in a way a nuclear attack never could. "North Korea has learned that a plausibly deniable attack is by far their preferred approach," says Bennett.

"I think they retain [bioweapons] as a deterrent and also as a covert weapon," says Weber. "So they could launch a biological attack, for example, during a mobilization in South Korea. If U.S. forces are flowing onto to peninsula, they could covertly release bioweapons and maybe use something ... to slow down the flow."

There's another reason Covid-19 could be bad for biosecurity: "Our fumbling of the response just advertises to the world how vulnerable we are to biological attacks," Weber says. "So countries that have been thinking about pursuing biological weapons or that have small programs might see the opportunity, and I would include non-state actors and terrorist groups in that." At the same time, biotechnology is becoming cheaper and faster, allowing more players to co-opt it for military purposes. But if countries can perfect early warning systems and vaccine technology, he believes "countries pursuing biological weapons would

decide it wasn't worth it—that they won't be effective because the defenses against them are so good.”

That also requires governments pay attention. In this year's budget, the Department of Defense cut its chemical and biological defense program nearly 10 percent—at a time, Weber warns, “when the threat is blinking red.”

[Afghanistan] U.S. Withdrawal Opens Way for Terror Alliance in Afghanistan (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [7/28/2020 5:00 PM, Sudhi Ranjan Sen, Ragini Saxena and Eltaf Najafizada, Neutral]

An alliance of terror groups aimed at destabilizing peace in South Asia is emerging in Afghanistan as U.S. troops pull out of the war-ravaged nation, security officials said.

Pakistan-based militant organizations, the Lashker-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, the Afghan Taliban and Islamic State-Khorasan, the local affiliate of the terror group, have come together to carry out raids on Indian assets in Kabul and also attacked a Sikh temple in the city, the officials said, requesting not to be identified citing rules on speaking to the media. The alliance is planning to step up attacks in other regions in South Asia, including against troops in India's Kashmir, they said.

A surge in terrorist activity in South Asia, home to quarter of the world's population and a third of its poor, could result in diversion of resources needed to pull millions out of poverty in the region. There's also a risk it may lead to a confrontation between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan, after an attack on Indian forces in Kashmir brought them to the brink in 2019.

“The longstanding fear has been that such groups would simply ‘wait out’ the U.S. and international presence, and that once the international presence was gone, they would destabilize Afghanistan and the larger region,” said Alyssa Ayres, Washington-based senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and a former U.S. deputy assistant secretary of state.

The U.S. is pulling troops out of Afghanistan following a peace agreement with the Taliban. President Donald Trump, who is seeking re-election, had pledged to get his country out of “endless wars.” The U.S. has already reduced forces to about 8,000 and handed over some bases to the Afghan government.

The Taliban were “maintaining good relationship” with regional and international terrorist organizations, including Al-Qaeda, Islamic State, LeT and others, said Javid Faisal, the spokesman for Afghanistan's National Security Council.

“This partnership between these terrorist organizations and the Taliban isn't just destabilizing Afghanistan or this region, but the entire world,” Faisal said. “They were supposed to cut off their ties to these terrorist groups long ago, they haven't done yet and they won't do as they all share the same ideology.”

Indian officials pointed to an attack on the oldest Sikh temple in Kabul in March, which left 25 dead, as well as counter terror operations in the Nanghar Province in April where 14

terrorists belonging to Pakistan-based militant groups and the Taliban were killed, as examples of the tie-up. Multiple joint training facilities have been set up in southern and central Afghanistan to carry out frequent attacks, they added. A spokesman for the internal security ministry declined to comment.

The attempts at peace is altering the power dynamics in Afghanistan, a senior Indian official said. Mirroring the warnings, a recent report of the United Nations pegged the total number of the Pakistani nationals fighting along side terrorist groups in Afghanistan may be as high as 6,500.

The South Asian region's historical disputes are also hindering a coordinated response to this threat. At the heart of the animosity between India and Pakistan is the Kashmir region, governed in part by the neighbors but claimed in full by both.

Pakistan said U.S. troop withdrawal won't lead to an increase of violence in the region, adding that the Kashmir situation was becoming volatile due to its mishandling by India. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government scrapped a key status for Jammu and Kashmir state last year and imposed federal rule.

"Trying to link the post-U.S. withdrawal Afghanistan to Kashmir issue is another malicious attempt by India to keep the region in a state of flux," Pakistan's defense forces media wing said in a statement. "The so-called intelligence reports alleging Pakistan to be following some kind of strategic design are simply baseless and laughable."

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahed denied any links with the Islamic State or terror groups based in Pakistan.

Editorials and Op-eds

How Covid-19 death rates can be dangerously misleading (CNN)

CNN [7/28/2020 6:50 PM, Dr. Kent Sepkowitz, 7975K, Neutral]

An interesting moment in Fox News reporter Chris Wallace's memorable interview of President Donald was a confusing back and forth about Covid-19 related deaths. The President claimed that the US had the "number one low mortality rate" in the world -- whereas Wallace insisted the US had little to crow about.

Though it is clear that Trump is completely wrong, comparing the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the mortality of each affected country turns out be a very tricky business. Because no one metric is perfect, especially when used to compare impact across countries, there is a large corner of epidemiology dedicated to how to most accurately tabulate death.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) devotes a long entry to addressing which is the best metric for a given situation in its online course, "Principles of Epidemiology in Public Health Practice."

As Covid-19 reporting has evolved, the death count has been the most cited number to track the size of the tragedy in the US and other countries. According to John Hopkins

University, more than 148,000 human lives in the US have been lost because of this disease.

Much time could and should be spent on understanding the death count, especially since a growing proportion of the US -- now 31% -- thinks the count is an overestimate. In contrast, most public health experts feel strongly that this is an underestimate.

The simple death count is not used in comparisons to other countries, due to vast differences in country population sizes. To account for this variation, most public health experts prefer to use rates, not counts.

The two most popular rate measures are the case fatality ratio (CFR) and the rate per total population (those with and without the disease) called the mortality rate. The Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, which Chris Wallace and Fox News cited during the President's interview, offers users an easy toggle between the two measures.

The CFR measures the number of deaths divided by the number of people diagnosed with the disease. The advantage of this metric is that it is intuitive and is exactly what an individual person with Covid-19 wants to know -- given the diagnosis, what is the likelihood I will die? The disadvantage is substantial because CFR can change depending on how much of a population is tested for a disease.

As an example, think of a country with 100 people where four people are hospitalized with Covid-19 and six others are diagnosed but are well enough to stay home. If no contact tracing or community tracing is done, only 10 people are known to have the infection. Three of these 10 people die, yielding a CFR of 30%.

Now consider if the same country with that population of the 10 infected people above performed contact tracing and community testing and diagnosed 10 additional persons with no or mild symptoms. As with the first example, three people die. But here the CFR is 15% (three deaths in 20 known cases). In other words, a higher testing rate leads to a lower CFR -- a point that might make a testing fan out of the President.

To circumvent the large problem introduced by diagnostic test volume, the mortality rate, in contrast, uses total population (those with the disease -- diagnosed or not -- AND those without the disease). Everyone. Period.

This metric has little value to a patient who wants to know his prognosis but measures exactly what public health authorities need to know -- how bad is this in my country compared to others. Using the above example of the 100-person country with three Covid-19 deaths, the mortality rate would be 3%, no matter how many people were tested.

The Johns Hopkins data used by many news outlets, including CNN and others, presents a table with information on the 20 countries most affected by Covid-19. During the interview, Wallace showed CFR results (though he called them mortality rates) and said, correctly, that US is 7th (it is now 10th) among these 20 countries -- nowhere near "number one" lowest in the world.

Even worse? From the way Kayleigh McEnany quickly produced the tables upon the

President's request, it appears that the information used by the White House in the interview might be used in their decision-making as well.

Their statistics are pulled from another (non-American) source, Our World in Data compiled by the UK's Oxford University. This data uses CFR and, unfortunately for those hoping the President will see the unfiltered truth, allows anyone to select as many or as few countries as they wish to frame the crisis according to their specific goals.

Though it is difficult to discern in the interview video (at about 2:45 in), President Trump used a graph that included information on only seven countries. In this group, the US ranked 4th (to my eye) with a CFR worse than Iceland, Brazil and South Korea. Again, even with the White House's carefully curated data, the US is mediocre at best.

An even more sobering view of how the US is doing is our actual mortality rate per 100,000 people (not CFR). Using this metric in the Johns Hopkins data, the US has the 17th worst mortality rate of the 20 most affected countries.

The number or rate of deaths from Covid-19 in the United States is a disaster no matter what metric is used. And it is clear from the interview that President Trump willingly presents misinformation he is given, even as the cameras are rolling.

But perhaps the most disturbing aspect of watching the interview is how strongly it suggests that the data being given to the President is deliberately incomplete.

He is informed, apparently, of how the US ranks in CFR against six other countries using the metric that public health experts view as inferior to the mortality rate.

At every step of the way, it seems, those entrusted to present the truth to the President have chosen instead to willingly protect their own well-being over that of the people of the United States.

The World's Covid Resurgence (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [7/28/2020 7:24 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Remember the stories blaming America's virus resurgence on states reopening too fast and praising other countries for crushing the virus with lockdowns? Well, flare-ups are now occurring in several countries that recently eased their lockdowns and travel restrictions. Victory declarations anywhere are premature.

New cases doubled in Spain over the weekend and are up six-fold in a month. Government officials have tied cases to migrant farm workers, tourists, family gatherings and young people partying. Catalonia, a tourist region known for vineyards and beaches, this weekend ordered the closure of night clubs and late-night bars. "Certain generations haven't remained vigilant," Spain Ministry of Health emergency director Fernando Simón said. Governors Doug Ducey of Arizona and Greg Abbott of Texas can sympathize. The United Kingdom has imposed a quarantine on travelers returning from Spain, which could be a blow to its tourism industry and economy that are trying to revive. But as Spanish officials point out, flare-ups have occurred across Europe since countries reopened their borders and economies a month ago.

Germany recently reported an outbreak in Bavaria tied to migrant farm workers from Romania. Last week France's Directorate General of Health warned "the circulation of the virus is increasing" after the country recorded more than 200 outbreaks. France is recording twice as many new cases per day as two weeks ago and last week mandated masks in public spaces. Australia's new daily cases have increased 11-fold in the last month. Cases have increased though Australia's government locked down Melbourne. Civil disobedience is rife. Nearly 90% of the infected didn't isolate between the time they started showing symptoms and were tested, Victoria Premier Daniel Andrews recently noted. More than half of those infected didn't isolate after being tested and when they got their results.

Japan and Hong Kong—both hailed as models of infection control—are also experiencing flare-ups tied to travelers and social gatherings. Japan's daily new cases have increased six-fold in the last month. Hong Kong is reporting 136 new cases each day on average, up from two four weeks ago, and on Monday it banned dine-in restaurants and gatherings of more than two.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe says he doesn't believe it's necessary to shut down businesses since most cases so far are among young people and hospitals have ample capacity. This is the same approach most Republican states are taking, and that Arizona, Texas and Florida took until some hospitals became strained. Democrats blame the U.S. case surge on inadequate testing and contact tracing. But the U.S. has averaged two to three times more tests per capita than most European and Asian countries. Arizona, California, Florida, and Texas all were doing more tests per capita when they lifted their lockdowns than Germany, Spain, France and South Korea have averaged.

More testing can help isolate infected individuals and identify asymptomatic cases. Delays in returning testing results in the U.S. has made it harder for states to do contact tracing. But contact tracers in many places, including the U.K. and New York, have reported other logistical challenges including getting people to share personal information.

In any case, more testing and contact tracing won't do much good if people don't self-quarantine or can't because they live with family in cramped housing. The latter is a problem in many U.S. hot spots. Mandating face masks could reduce spread in public settings but isn't a panacea, especially if young people don't comply and ignore social distancing.

Spanish night clubs required face masks, but pictures showed young people wearing them on their chins. Most people in U.S. hot spots were wearing face masks before governments mandated them. According to global data firm Dynata, face mask use in early July was around 80% in Houston, southeast Florida and New York City. Amid the post-lockdown flare-ups, it's worth revisiting Sweden, which has been widely criticized for never closing businesses and primary schools. Cases have been falling over the past month after a modest uptick in June due to more testing. Only 27 patients have died in the last week, fewer per capita than New York.

America's liberals cite Sweden's relatively high death rate (56 per 100,000 compared to 45.1 in France and 35.8 in the Netherlands). But two-thirds of deaths have been among those over age 80, and 97% never received intensive-care treatment. Blame Sweden's

socialized health system, which rationed treatment for the elderly even though ICUs were never overwhelmed.

The lesson is that the virus won't disappear anytime soon. Governments may have to impose some business and social restrictions to protect hospitals and the vulnerable. But lockdowns aren't a miracle cure, and their collateral damage is too severe to sustain.

Face-mask data doubletake (Washington Times)

Washington Times [7/28/2020 6:29 PM, Staff, 459K, Neutral]

Symbols matter. Some result from trendy twists in popular culture, others are born out of abject necessity. The face mask, a symbol of the will to survive in this pandemic-wracked era, is both. A half-year into the struggle, the unknowns about combating the coronavirus still threaten to overwhelm the knowns, even when the subject is face coverings. As a symbol, the face mask represents solidarity with the campaign to crush COVID-19. As a means of dampening the spread of infection, it's better than nothing, probably.

For the likes of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, face masks have taken on the look of a fashion accessory, featuring a variety of colorful styles to match her outfit of the day. For bikers and runners, sporting a low-slung neck gaiter exhibits an aptitude for both social awareness and enviable fitness. Grocery-store clerks with black masks pulled beneath the chin simply show how rules are bent for life in the real world.

Beyond the realm of virtue signals, at least 30 states have instituted face mask mandates. If they clearly control the virus, reason dictates that where face mask usage is high, death rates should be low. It is not necessarily the case.

The United States has the dreadful honor of chalking up the world's highest COVID-19 death count, with 150,000 fatalities since the virus erupted, according to Johns Hopkins University data compiled by Worldometer. The death rate of 453 per 1 million population, though, is far from the highest. During the months of disease, face mask usage among Americans climbed slowly from 7% of the population in early March to 74% by July 20, according to global surveys conducted by YouGov.

Italy, one of the European nations most ravaged by the virus, has recorded a death rate of 581 per 1 million — worse than that of the U.S. During the same period, Italy's mask usage rose rapidly from 26% in mid-March to 89% a month later, never falling below 81%. For all its strict adherence to the highly touted safety measure, the body count was still devastating.

In the United Arab Emirates, the face-covering trend line closely mirrored Italy's. Except for a dip in early April, about 80% of the Arab nation's citizens masked up for protection. The death rate, though, only measured 35 per 1 million — a small fraction of the Italians'.

In Finland, citizens have hardly bothered to cover their faces. Starting in mid-March, a miniscule 1% of the population did so, rising to 7% by mid-June, when local surveying ceased. Despite their nonchalant attitude toward COVID-19, the Finns registered only 59 deaths per 1 million residents.

Like Finland, nearby Sweden also gave short shrift to face masks, with 1% wearing them in early April, 10% percent by mid-April, then usage wavered between 2% and 6% for the next two months. Unlike their Nordic neighbors, though, Swedes suffered a crushing death rate of 564 per 1 million population.

Results from around the world offer no incontestable indication that masking is a reliable method of preventing COVID infections, a point emphasized in a July 16 opinion piece by infectious disease experts published by the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota: "Wearing a cloth mask or face covering could be better than doing nothing, but we simply don't know at this point." Over-reliance on mask effectiveness, they warned, could cause individuals to disregard a protective measure with clear efficacy: social distancing.

Other experts come to differing conclusions. A study published June 16 in the health care journal *Health Affairs* found that following face mask mandates issued in April, 15 states and the District of Columbia experienced a 2% slowdown in the spread of virus infections over a three-week period. "The study provides evidence that states in the U.S. mandating use of face masks in public had a greater decline in daily COVID-19 growth rates after issuing these mandates compared to states that did not issue mandates," researchers write.

Evidently, face mask effectiveness is hit and miss. Still, Americans could do worse than adopt the pop culture version of the physician's oath: "First, do no harm." So long as everyone also remembers to keep their social distance, donning a mask is a powerful symbol of the will to survive.

[China] How to Hold Beijing Accountable for the Coronavirus (Wall Street Journal)
Wall Street Journal [7/28/2020 6:56 PM, Jamie Metz, Neutral]

If a country accidentally launched a nuclear missile killing more than 650,000 people, world leaders would at least demand a comprehensive and immediate investigation into what happened to make sure it didn't occur again. But as evidence grows that the equally deadly Covid-19 pandemic may stem from a Wuhan virology lab's accidental leak followed by a Chinese government coverup, most politicians across the globe have been strangely silent. Unless policy makers understand the novel coronavirus's origins, the world remains vulnerable to an even deadlier pandemic in the future.

The closest known relative to SARS-CoV-2 is a virus sampled by Chinese researchers from six miners infected while working in a bat-infested cave in southern China in 2012. These miners developed symptoms we now associate with Covid-19. Half of them died. These viral samples were then taken to the Wuhan Institute of Virology—the only facility in China that's a biosafety Level 4 laboratory, the highest possible safety designation. The Level 4 designation is reserved for facilities dealing with the most dangerous pathogens. Wuhan is more than 1,000 miles north of Yunnan province, where the cave is located. If the virus jumped to humans through a series of human-animal encounters in the wild or in wet markets, as Beijing has claimed, we would likely have seen evidence of people being infected elsewhere in China before the Wuhan outbreak. We have not.

The alternative explanation, a lab escape, is far more plausible. We know the Wuhan Institute of Virology was using controversial "gain of function" techniques to make viruses

more virulent for research purposes. A confidential 2018 State Department cable released this month highlighting the lab's alarming safety record should heighten our concern.

Suggesting that an outbreak of a deadly bat coronavirus coincidentally occurred near the only level 4 virology institute in all of China—which happened to be studying the closest known relative of that exact virus—strains credulity. Above all, China's extensive coverup raises red flags. In the critical first weeks after the initial outbreak, Beijing actively suppressed essential information and prevented World Health Organization investigators from entering the country while samples were destroyed. When a courageous Chinese biologist posted the sequenced genome of the virus online, his lab was immediately shut "for rectification." The Chinese government has forbidden scientists to discuss publicly the origins of the pandemic. Citizen journalists investigating the issue have disappeared. In the words of a European Union report that were controversially later removed from the final version, "China has continued to run a global disinformation campaign to deflect blame for the outbreak of the pandemic."

In May, 120 countries represented in the World Health Assembly agreed to an "impartial, independent and comprehensive evaluation" to "review experience gained and lessons learned from the WHO-coordinated international health response to COVID-19."

This strange and potentially restrictive wording represented a compromise allowing Beijing enough wiggle room to avoid any serious investigation. Chinese President Xi Jinping made this intransigence even clearer by stating the investigation should only begin after the pandemic is contained. Although a WHO advance-planning team left for China on July 10, it is highly likely that any international investigation will be significantly curtailed by the Chinese government.

It's easy to understand why Beijing would not be thrilled about a deep investigation into the origins of the pandemic. If the deaths of so many people around the world were traced to a lab accident and coverup, the consequences within China and globally would be monumental.

It is harder to understand why so many people outside China are stepping so gingerly.

Part of this can be explained by China's outsize global influence. When Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison suggested an investigation, Beijing immediately punished Australia with a reduction in trade. With China's economy rebounding while the U.S. is struggling, many countries fear upsetting the Chinese government could endanger their economic future or make it harder to source critical medical supplies. Many progressives also seem to be censoring themselves for fear of legitimizing what they see as President Trump's effort to blame China and the WHO to deflect criticism of America's own failures.

But not getting to the bottom of this crisis would be the height of absurdity. Too much is at stake.

To ensure everyone's safety, the WHO and outside investigators must be empowered to explore all relevant questions about the origins of the pandemic without limits. This comprehensive forensic investigation must include full access to all of the scientists, biological samples, laboratory records and other materials from the Wuhan virology

institutes and other relevant Chinese organizations.

Denying that access should be considered an admission of guilt by Beijing.

But there is an even better way forward. By working together to fully understand the origins of the pandemic, how we failed to respond appropriately, and what we must do to prevent the next crisis, we can build a safer world for everyone.

Coronavirus News

Kodak to produce pharmaceutical ingredients with U.S. government loan (Washington Post)

Washington Post [7/28/2020 6:45 PM, Jeanne Whalen, Neutral]

In a deal aimed at reducing U.S. reliance on China, the federal government announced Tuesday that it plans to give Eastman Kodak Company a \$765 million loan to start producing the chemical ingredients needed to make pharmaceuticals.

The company plans to establish a new division, Kodak Pharmaceuticals, that will focus on the building blocks used to produce generic drugs, according to a joint statement from Kodak and the lending agency, the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation, or DFC.

The planned investment, reported earlier by the Wall Street Journal, will create about 350 jobs at Kodak's home base in Rochester, N.Y., and in St. Paul, Minn., the company said.

DFC normally funds infrastructure and other projects in the developing world. But in an executive order signed in May, President Trump gave DFC new powers under the Defense Production Act to finance domestic health-care manufacturing needed to respond to the coronavirus crisis.

Shortages of face masks and other protective equipment for doctors and nurses have raised concerns in recent months about U.S. reliance on China and India for pharmaceutical ingredients and finished medicines. About 40 percent of the world's supply of drug ingredients is used to produce generic medicines for Americans, but only 10 percent these materials are manufactured in the United States, according to DFC.

The aim is "to re-shore critical industries so if we ever end up in a situation like this again we are not relying on China or others," DFC chief executive Adam Boehler said in an interview.

"It's a breakthrough in bringing pharmaceutical manufacturing back to the United States," Trump said of the deal during a coronavirus briefing, calling it his administration's 33rd use of the Defense Production Act.

Boehler signed a preliminary agreement with Kodak Executive Chairman Jim Continenza on Tuesday to provide the loan, which is still subject to final DFC due diligence, a Kodak spokeswoman said.

In an interview, Continenza said Kodak has more than 130 years of experience manufacturing chemicals, which the company has used to make film and other products. "We are truly doing this to help tighten and fix the supply chain of pharmaceuticals in America," Continenza said, adding that U.S. reliance on imported ingredients is worrying. "I have kids, and they're going to have kids. ... We cannot have this," he said.

Kodak plans to produce two types of chemicals used to make pills and tablets: the initial building blocks, known as key starting materials and more refined substances called active pharmaceutical ingredients, known as API.

In recent years, Kodak has been making key starting materials for a few pharmaceutical companies upon request, Continenza said. Kodak plans to repurpose and expand some of its manufacturing lines to carry out the work, he said.

Susan Capie, managing director of PharmaVantage, a consultancy in Babylon, N.Y., said she sees several challenges.

When drug companies ask the Food and Drug Administration for permission to sell a new medicine in the United States, they must specify which API suppliers they plan to use. It can take 10 months or more for the FDA to approve a new supplier, meaning Kodak might not have immediate API buyers, she said.

Kodak also will face tough price competition from overseas suppliers, she said, although she added that tougher environmental regulation in China in recent years has driven up prices there. U.S. companies might prefer to deal with a domestic supplier, but it "would depend on the price differential," she said.

Continenza said Kodak would provide "the highest value for the lowest cost."

Peter Navarro, a White House adviser who has long pushed to boost manufacturing in the United States, was involved in the Kodak deal and attended the signing ceremony on Tuesday.

In an interview, Navarro said the federal government will help bolster Kodak's business by buying some API for a strategic stockpile. Navarro and Boehler also said some drug companies plan to sign advance purchase orders for Kodak's ingredients.

Kodak founder George Eastman began selling some of the first cameras to consumers in 1888, but the switch to digital and then smart-phone cameras left the company in the lurch, forcing it to file for bankruptcy in 2012. It later emerged from bankruptcy and tried to focus on a few businesses, including printing machines and specialty film for motion pictures and other industries.

Kodak's stock more than tripled after news of the deal broke Tuesday.

Deputy Defense Secretary David Norquist also attended the signing ceremony. Because DFC is lending the money under the Defense Production Act, the Defense Department bears the cost of the loan, DFC said.

DFC said it has invited other companies to apply for financing under the Defense Production Act for projects supporting domestic production of drugs, personal protective equipment and other medical supplies such as vaccines or virus testing materials.

Pfizer Foresees Lasting Demand for Covid-19 Vaccine (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [7/28/2020 4:15 PM, Matt Grossman, Neutral]

Pfizer Inc. said it expects global demand for vaccinations against coronavirus illnesses to last at least several years, sharpening a long-term forecast for its experimental Covid-19 vaccine as the company moves forward with the final-stage of clinical testing.

Mass vaccinations across the globe could be needed into 2022 and booster shots may be needed annually or every few years if the new coronavirus becomes a seasonal or long-term health concern, company executives said Tuesday.

Chief Executive Albert Bourla criticized executive orders signed last week by President Trump aimed at reducing U.S. drug prices, saying such policies risk detracting from the effort to develop Covid-19 medications at a critical time.

"They pose enormous distraction at a time when the industry needs to be completely focused on developing potential Covid vaccines or treatment," Mr. Bourla said on a conference call after Pfizer reported second-quarter financial results.

New-York based Pfizer reported an 11% decline in revenue from a year earlier to \$11.8 billion, but the earnings beat analyst forecasts and the company said its manufacturing operations have faced little disruption from Covid-19.

The possibility of long-term demand for a Covid-19 vaccine offers a potential growth opportunity as the company plans to invest more than \$1 billion this year developing the vaccine. While the drugmaker already makes top-selling pneumococcal vaccine Prevnar 13, it has been scaling up its manufacturing capabilities around the world in anticipation of a safe and effective vaccine.

"Coronaviruses tend to be skilled at evading sustained immunity," research-and-development chief Dr. Mikael Dolsten said in an interview. Dr. Dolsten said the class of viruses has "adapted to circulate in humans and cross many species, so it would be unlikely that it would just start to disappear."

Angela Hwang, president of Pfizer Biopharmaceuticals Group, told investors on a conference call that the company anticipates standard, or seasonal, vaccinations for a number of years beyond 2022.

Analysts at JPMorgan Chase & Co. estimate Pfizer's vaccine-generating annual sales will reach about \$5.5 billion in 2022, assuming an initial price of about \$20 a dose in the U.S.

Pfizer on Monday began the last stage, or phase 3, of an experimental Covid-19 vaccine study that seeks to enroll 30,000 people. Pfizer is developing the vaccine, one of the most advanced for the new coronavirus, with BioNTech SE. Another major vaccine developer, Moderna Inc., started its own phase 3 study this week. A vaccine developed by University of

Oxford researchers and AstraZeneca PLC that has started late-stage testing overseas is scheduled to begin final, phase 3 studies in the U.S. next month.

Pfizer's study is moving rapidly and is targeting October to file for regulatory approval or emergency-use authorization. The company is aiming to determine the vaccine's efficacy quickly in part by testing in areas of the U.S. where the virus is spreading and by enrolling a diverse population, including high-risk participants.

The vaccine it is giving to trial patients is different from the one for which the companies previously published scientific results. Pfizer said the latest vaccine appears to be more tolerable and could provide better protection from Covid-19.

Mr. Bourla said Tuesday that the company won't charge developed countries outside the U.S. more for the potential Covid-19 vaccine, should it prove to work safely, than what it would charge in the U.S. Developing countries, such as those in Africa, or governments that can't afford the vaccine could pay less, Mr. Bourla said in the interview.

"It's a very different dynamic over there and I will not hold us to the same standard to charge \$19 per dose," he said of African countries.

Pricing and cost have emerged as increasingly sensitive issues for vaccine manufacturers and governments that are paying for them. Some companies have said they will charge a price at the cost of producing their shots. Last week, the U.S. agreed to pay Pfizer and partner BioNTech nearly \$2 billion to secure 100 million doses, which analysts estimated at about \$20 a dose. It also agreed to supply the U.K. with 30 million doses for an unspecified amount.

Pfizer's pricing might change after the pandemic phase, when vaccines would be impacted by typical commercial factors such as competition and volume, Mr. Bourla said on the investor call. The vaccine the company is testing uses an unproven gene-based technology known as messenger RNA, or mRNA that is involved in making a spike-shaped protein resembling the one on the surface of the coronavirus. The vaccine candidate being used in the final, phase 3 study encodes a full-size spike protein, instead of just a portion of it as was used in the earlier candidate. Pfizer researchers believe this vaccine would offer better protection, particularly for older adults.

Mark Mulligan, director of the Vaccine Center at NYU Langone Health, which began giving doses of Pfizer's vaccine on Tuesday, said he aims to enroll hundreds of subjects in about two months. The company will start by reviewing the more than 1,000 people who expressed interest in Pfizer's early-stage trial, looking "for those with higher-than-average risk," Dr. Mulligan said. "We really have to enroll the right people."

Separately, the company also said it expects to begin testing its experimental antiviral for Covid-19 in humans in September.

Pfizer on Tuesday reported revenue of \$11.8 billion, an 11% decline from \$13.3 billion a year earlier. Analysts' consensus had forecast sales of \$11.58 billion, according to FactSet. The company reported growth in its biopharma division in the latest quarter, but overall sales fell amid increased competition in its generic-drug business.

The pandemic caused quarterly sales to drop about 4%, in part because of disruptions to wellness visits for adults and children. Sales for Pfizer's division of newer, patent-protected medications, which includes breast-cancer treatment Ibrance and blood thinner Eliquis, grew 4% to \$9.8 billion, up from \$9.43 billion a year earlier.

But the company's overall sales trend was pulled down by falling sales at Upjohn, Pfizer's off-patent drug division. Upjohn's sales declined 32% year over year to about \$2 billion, which the company blamed in part on the loss of exclusivity for its pain medication Lyrica. Pfizer agreed last year to combine Upjohn with Mylan NV. The deal, which would create a company called Viatris, is expected to close in the fourth quarter.

Pfizer's quarterly profit was 61 cents a share, or 78 cents a share on an adjusted basis, the company said. Analysts had forecast an adjusted profit of 67 cents a share. The company also slightly boosted its full-year earnings guidance as it will exist after the Upjohn transaction, raising its projected sales range to \$40.8 billion to \$42.4 billion. Previously, Pfizer had guided for yearly revenue of \$40.7 billion to \$42.3 billion. The guidance doesn't account for future Covid-19 vaccine sales.

The Trump administration was slow to recognize coronavirus threat from Europe, CDC director admits (CNN)

CNN [7/28/2020 11:14 PM, Shelby Lin Erdman, 7975K, Neutral]

The United States was slow in recognizing the coronavirus threat from Europe, Dr. Robert Redfield, the director of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, admitted for the first time Tuesday in an interview with ABC News.

"The introduction from Europe happened before we realized what was happening," Redfield said. "By the time we realized (the) Europe threat and shut down travel to Europe, there was probably already two or three weeks of 60,000 people coming back every day from Europe," he added.

"That's where the large seeding came in the United States."

The US restricted travel from China on February 2 and from Europe on March 13, but by March 8, Covid-19 was already circulating among the community in New York City and, by March 15, community transmission of the virus was already widespread, a recent analysis from the CDC found.

By the time the Trump administration banned travelers from Europe, the virus was already spreading in New York City, according to the report. Testing was also limited at the start of the epidemic there, allowing people with undetected cases to spread the virus.

During the ABC interview, Redfield also admitted that there have been problems with the federal response.

"Yes, there's been mistakes," he said. "And, yes, we fail. We're in it doing the best we can and we're trying to make the best judgments we can."

The CDC director discussed his initial response to news of something mysterious happening in central China.

He said he got a phone call on New Year's Eve last year alerting him to an incident involving a respiratory condition in Wuhan and he told ABC he knew it was serious. He said he wrote the first situation report on the incident the very next day.

"We felt that this had potential to be a very serious situation that had national security implications."

The CDC was ready to send in a team of scientists within a week, but the Chinese government refused to let them in, Redfield said, something he has said before and pointed to as a reason the US got a later start in identifying the dangerous virus and taking action. He also said he's optimistic that the country can get the upper hand in the battle against the coronavirus.

"I wish now we would come together and recognize and see the possibility that we can beat this pandemic," he said.

"We're not powerless. We don't have to wait for a vaccine, although I think we're going to be successful sooner than many people think. We have the most powerful weapon in our hands right now, I mean it's an enormously powerful weapon. It's just a simple, flimsy mask," Redfield said.

"This virus can be defeated if people just wear a mask."

Global airlines less hopeful on COVID-19 recovery (Reuters)

Reuters [7/28/2020 11:36 PM, Laurence Frost, Jamie Freed, 5304K, Neutral]

Global airlines cut their coronavirus recovery forecast on Tuesday, saying it would take until 2024 - a year longer than previously expected - for passenger traffic to return to pre-crisis levels.

In an update on the pandemic's crippling impact on air travel, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) cited slow virus containment in the United States and developing countries, and a weaker outlook for corporate travel.

Lingering travel barriers and new restrictions in some markets are also weighing on nearer-term prospects, IATA said, cutting its 2020 passenger numbers forecast to a 55% decline - sharper than the 46% drop predicted in April.

"The second half of this year will see a slower recovery than we'd hoped," IATA Chief Economist Brian Pearce said. June passenger numbers were down 86.5% year-on-year, the organisation said, after a 91% contraction in May.

A surprise move by Britain to quarantine arrivals from Spain has created lot of uncertainty, Pearce said. "That is clearly going to be an issue with the recovery."

Recovery prospects are weakened by the spread of COVID-19 in the United States and

developing countries together representing 40% of global air travel, IATA said.

International travel is unlikely to rebound significantly without a reasonably priced testing regime that was deemed acceptable by governments, Association of Asia Pacific Airlines Director General Subhas Menon said. Depending on the country, tests can cost hundreds of dollars.

"We need advice from public health experts on how to go about that," he told Reuters in an interview in Sydney on Wednesday. "If it is cheap enough then maybe you can expect travellers to pay for it. At the moment the cost is quite intimidating."

Business travel may also face a sustained slump, threatening the profitability of long-haul airlines and routes as corporate clients rein in spending and make greater use of video-conferences that have become the norm during lockdowns.

"It will remain to be seen whether we see a recovery to pre-crisis business travel patterns," Pearce said. "Our concern is that we won't."

Trade

Bloomberg New Economy Conversation Series: Saving Global Trade (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [7/28/2020 8:07 PM, Staff, 6400K, Neutral]

Covid-19 is the perfect storm for the global trading system. On top of the U.S.-China trade war and an upsurge in technology nationalism, borders all over the world are closing to the flow of people, goods and services. Slowing trade and shrinking supply chains will hurt the most vulnerable countries in the developing world. How can we save the multilateral trading system? Senior International Partner at WilmerHale Charlene Barshefsky, The Wall Street Journal Senior Editor Bob Davis, Global Counsel Co-Founder and Chairman Peter Mandelson, Husco International President and CEO Austin Ramirez, The Wall Street Journal Senior China Correspondent Lingling Wei, discuss how to save global trade in a post-covid world. [Editorial note: Consult source link for video]

[United Kingdom] U.K. Urged to Act Now to Protect Food Standards in Trade Deals (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [7/28/2020 7:01 PM, Agnieszka de Sousa, 6400K, Neutral]

The U.K. should adopt a farming certification system to safeguard high food standards as it negotiates future trade deals, according to recommendations from a government-commissioned review.

Ministers were urged to introduce a program to allow farmers from other countries to certify they meet British animal welfare and environmental standards. This would then result in a cut to tariffs provided they meet the benchmark, according to the National Food Strategy published Wednesday.

"Standards are not the same thing as protectionism," said Henry Dimbleby, the review's lead author. "Using tailored certification systems would allow us to get these deals done without compromising on our core values."

The U.K. is looking to make trade deals as it prepares to fully leave the European Union at the end of the year and agriculture has been a particular sticking point in talks with Washington. There has been a public backlash over fears that Britain will be flooded with U.S. food produced at lower standards -- most notably chlorine-washed chicken or hormone-treated beef.

The certification system would allow Britain to reach agreements without having to surrender its high standards in the face of political pressure, according to Dimbleby, co-founder of the Leon restaurant chain. He was picked by the government to lead the study, which is billed as the first major review of British food in 75 years.

Such certification systems would not be required for trading with the EU, to which the U.K. is already closely aligned, or for deals with other countries that may carry over from the EU, he said.

"The issue of how to strike trade deals without lowering food standards needs to be addressed now, before it is too late," Dimbleby said. "There is justifiable concern about opening up our markets to cheaper, low-standard imports which would undercut our own producers and make a nonsense of our progressive farming policies."

Near East & North Africa

Yemen Factions Accept Saudi Proposal to Implement Peace Deal (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [7/28/2020 10:09 PM, Zaid Sabah, 5304K, Neutral]

Yemen's internationally recognized government and southern separatists agreed on a mechanism proposed by the Saudis, aimed at closing one front in the five-year conflict.

The proposal would accelerate the implementation of the Riyadh agreement the two sides reached last November, the official Saudi news agency SPA reported.

The proposed mechanism includes maintaining the cease-fire and de-escalation between the two sides. It also calls for the separatist Southern Transitional Council to announce that it is abandoning self-administration and resuming the implementation of last November's agreement. Al-Arabiya news service reported the STC announced it's abandoning self-administration.

Yemeni president Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi has named Ahmed Lamlas, an official from the Southern Transitional Council as Aden governor and asked Prime Minister Maeen Abdulmalik Saeed to form a new government, shortly after the agreement was reached, al-Arabiya television reported.

According to the agreement, the Yemeni prime minister would form a "government of political competencies" with equal representation from north and south Yemen within 30 days and including representatives of the Southern Transitional Council, SPA said.

Saudi Arabia's deputy defense minister, Khalid bin Salman, praised the agreement in a tweet.

As part of the plan, a governor and security director for Aden Governorate would be appointed, and the Yemeni prime minister would be assigned the task of forming a "government of political competencies" with equal representation from north and south Yemen within 30 days and including representatives of the Southern Transitional Council, SPA said.

Military forces, according to SPA report, should exit Aden Governorate and the forces of the two parties in Abyan should be separated and return to their previous positions.

The internationally recognized government has also been fighting the Iran-backed Houthi rebels, who were not a party to the Riyadh agreement.

Yemen's separatists to give up self-rule, push peace deal (AP)

AP [7/28/2020 10:51 PM, Staff, 2164K, Neutral]

Yemen's leading separatist group will abandon its aspirations for self-rule to implement a stalled peace deal brokered by Saudi Arabia, it announced early Wednesday in a major step toward closing a dangerous rift between nominal allies in the chaotic proxy war.

Nizar Haitham, a spokesman for the separatists' Southern Transitional Council, an umbrella group of militias backed by the United Arab Emirates, said the separatists would give up their dreams of autonomy over southern Yemen to pursue the Riyadh agreement.

"We have achieved our goals," said Haitham, noting that the announcement came under intense pressure from Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E. "We affirm the continuing and deepening of our strategic partnership with the Arab coalition."

The power-sharing deal, signed in the Saudi capital of Riyadh last fall, sets the stage to end a long-running rivalry between Yemen's Saudi-backed government and the Emirati-backed southern separatists. The agreement was thrown into disarray earlier this year, when the separatists seized control of the southern port city of Aden, the interim seat of the internationally recognized government, igniting fierce clashes across southern Yemen and the Socotra archipelago.

Saudi Arabia declared early Wednesday that it had proposed a plan to "accelerate" the deal's implementation, which calls for the creation of a new government within 30 days and the appointment of a new governor and security director for Aden, according to the official Saudi Press Agency.

Throughout the war, the two Sunni Arab states, Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E., have been partners in a military coalition fighting to oust the Iran-allied Shiite Houthi rebels, who seized northern Yemen in 2014.

The standoff between their respective Yemeni allies has frequently erupted into violent turmoil, threatening to shatter the Saudi-led coalition and complicating broader peace efforts to end the five-year conflict, which has killed over 112,000 people and set off the world's worst humanitarian disaster.

The new Saudi proposal lays out commitments that have been obstacles for months, such

as the formation of a government composed of 24 ministers with equal representation for northerners and southerners, including the separatists. It also asks for the withdrawal of rival forces from Aden and the flashpoint southern province of Abyan.

The parties' commitment to a final deal remains unclear. But the Southern Transitional Council's breakthrough concession, which prompted outrage on social media from its hard-line supporters, suggests separatists had agreed in principle to the Saudi proposal.

The blueprint gives Yemen's current prime minister, Maeen Abdulmalik Saeed, the mandate to form a government over the next month. Yemen's state-run SABA news agency named the newly appointed security director and governor of Aden on Wednesday.

Yemen's government spokesman Rajih Badi welcomed the Saudi initiative and expressed hope that the separatists would make good on their promise to implement the agreement "out of necessary and urgent national interest."

Khalid bin Salman, Saudi Arabia's vice minister of defense, said that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's "efforts have succeeded" to implement the Riyadh deal "and achieve lasting peace, security, and prosperity for Yemen."

The rapprochement comes as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the war's main sponsors, have sought to inch away from their costly war with the Houthi rebels, which has pushed millions to the brink of famine and settled into a bloody stalemate.

Saudi Arabia announced a unilateral cease-fire earlier this year, which swiftly collapsed but more broadly reflected its growing unease with the war. Last summer, the UAE announced it was ending its role in the conflict, although it continues to wield influence through its proxies, such as the separatist group.

Although the deal seems unlikely to be a step toward lasting peace, even a vague prospect of a settlement was welcome, as Yemen's devastated health sector grapples with a major coronavirus outbreak and the country faces a drastic shortfall of humanitarian aid that has forced 75% of U.N. programs for the country to end or reduce operations.

On Tuesday, U.N. special envoy to Yemen Martin Griffiths painted a bleak picture of Yemen to the Security Council.

U.N.-mediated peace negotiations between the rebels and government have failed to produce an agreement, he said. Houthi forces are pushing fiercely into the oil-rich province of Marib "with profound humanitarian and economic consequences." Airstrikes have killed multiple children across the northwest. The economy is collapsing, food prices are surging, and, to make matters worse, an abandoned oil tanker moored off the coast loaded with more than 1 million barrels of crude oil is at risk of rupture or exploding.

"I do not wish to sugarcoat things," said Griffiths, warning that the country could plunge at any moment into "a new phase of prolonged escalation, uncontrolled spread of COVID-19, and economic decline."

Saudi Arabia proposes new mechanism for stability in Yemen's south (Reuters)

Reuters [7/29/2020 2:09 AM, Hesham Abdul Khalek and Lisa Barrington, 5304K, Neutral]

Saudi Arabia has presented a framework to expedite a stalled November deal in Yemen's south designed to end a standoff between nominal allies under a Saudi-led coalition, Saudi state news agency SPA said on Wednesday.

Riyadh is seeking to unite separatist and government forces in Yemen's south to concentrate their common fight against the Iran-aligned Houthi forces, which control the north of the country.

The Yemeni government, based in the southern port of Aden, and the separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC) are nominal allies in the Saudi-led coalition, which has been at war against the Houthis since 2014.

But the STC declared self-rule in April, and the two sides have been fighting in Aden and other southern regions, complicating U.N. efforts for a permanent ceasefire to the overall conflict.

Under the new Saudi resolution, the STC is required to rescind self-rule as both parties implement the November deal.

That Saudi-brokered deal, known as the "Riyadh agreement", had been negotiated in response to an STC takeover of Aden city in August last year, but was never implemented.

On Wednesday, STC spokesman Nizar Haitham said the group would rescind self-rule and work towards implementing the new framework.

The Saudi resolution stipulates appointing a governor for Aden city, the de facto headquarters of the internationally recognised Yemeni government. It states military forces should leave Aden governorate and forces in Abyan province should separate and return to previous positions.

On Wednesday, a new governor was appointed for Aden - Ahmed al-Amlas, Yemeni government news agency Sabanet said.

Yemen's prime minister should form a government within 30 days representing north and south Yemen equally and including STC representatives, the Saudi announcement said.

In June, government and southern separatist forces agreed on a ceasefire in the south. The resolution stipulates this should continue.

The Yemeni government welcomed the new Saudi resolution, spokesman Rajeh Badi told Sabanet news.

"The consent of the Yemeni parties to accelerate the implementation of the agreement reflects the serious desire for dialogue," Saudi vice minister of defence Khalid bin Salman tweeted.

The U.N. has been holding virtual talks between the warring parties to agree to a permanent

ceasefire and a restart to peace negotiations last held in December 2018 for a broad national resolution to a conflict that has created the world's largest humanitarian crisis.

The U.N.'s Yemen envoy Martin Griffiths on Tuesday warned the window of opportunity to reach an agreement was limited.

"There is a real risk that these negotiations will slip away, and that Yemen will enter a new phase of prolonged escalation, of the uncontrolled spread of COVID-19, and of severe and threatening economic decline," he told the U.N. security council.

Yemen's STC announces abandonment of self-administration (Reuters)

Reuters [7/28/2020 7:48 PM, Hesham Abdul Khalek, 5304K, Neutral]

Yemen's Southern Transitional Council (STC) announced on Wednesday that it's abandoning self-administration, the spokesman Nizar Haitham wrote on twitter.

Earlier on Wednesday, Saudi Arabia announced it presented a resolution to accelerate implementation of the Riyadh agreement, which includes appointing a new governor for Aden and forming a government within 30 days.

[Israel] In Israel, first hijab-wearing lawmaker hopes to build bridges (Yahoo News/Christian Science Monitor)

Yahoo News/Christian Science Monitor [7/27/2020 1:02 PM, Dina Kraft, 11261K, Neutral]

In her hilltop village home outside Nazareth, Iman Khatib Yassin, one of Israel's newest lawmakers, sinks into a chair in her living room, furnished with plush cream-colored couches and Persian rugs.

Wearing a pale green hijab headscarf and rose-colored cardigan, she clasps her hands on the lap of her floor-skimming dress. It's been a long week, she explains in her low, gentle voice, a week of shuttling between parliamentary committee meetings on the coronavirus and the economy in Jerusalem, and long drives to tend to her ailing mother at a hospital in the Galilee. She would return home around 11 p.m.

Ms. Khatib Yassin still seems surprised that she's a member of the Knesset, Israel's parliament, more than four months after being elected. A social worker and community center director, she had long turned down suggestions that she enter politics. In the end she decided to run for office in March because she was motivated by the idea of representation itself.

"I strongly felt a calling to serve others, I saw running as a chance to open the door to other traditional women. But even though I ran I still didn't think I had any chance of actually getting into the Knesset," she says.

She scraped in, 15th on the Joint List, a coalition of parties representing the descendants of the Palestinian Arabs who stayed in Israel in 1948 when the state was created as a Jewish homeland. Others fled or were expelled, settling as refugees in Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon. The Joint List won 15 seats, which made it the third largest party in Israel and made Ms. Khatib Yassin the first hijab-wearing Muslim woman to be elected to parliament in the history of Israel.

She knows the hijab, the Islamic headscarf, is what people will see first, but she hopes to make her mark, she says, as a feminist with a social welfare agenda that will transcend ethnic boundaries to help all of those marginalized and in need.

"I believe we need to push and invest and if we do, ultimately that work will pay off," says Ms. Khatib Yassin, the daughter of farmers with little education who pushed her and her siblings to go to university.

Another breakthrough – she is the first woman elected to the Knesset from Ra'am, a party representing the Southern Islamic Movement, known for its conservative brand of Islam and network of social services.

Ms. Khatib Yassin, a middle-aged mother of four, is credited with helping get the Arab women's vote out in the March elections. She campaigned especially hard in the Negev desert among Bedouin women, giving speeches in village courtyards to pitch the importance of making their voices as devout Muslim women heard in the corridors of power. She would leave her home at 6 a.m., returning after midnight. Rose, her daughter, 24, acted as her driver.

She recalls a speech to a group of men and women when someone proposed a photo. Some men balked, mindful of the taboo against mixed-gender gatherings in traditional Bedouin society. But they relented. A woman pulled her aside to whisper, "Iman, we are breaking barriers."

No Arab party has ever joined an Israeli governing coalition, but the Joint List is demanding to take part in decision-making, especially on budget allocations and investment in Arab towns, and on issues that disproportionately impact Palestinian citizens of Israel such as home demolitions, rising crime levels, and civil rights. During the election campaign the party said it was ready to join a government under the right conditions.

The current politically polarized climate, in which the right-wing establishment paints the Arab electorate as disloyal and dangerous, makes the likelihood of a such an outcome low. But just floating the idea seems to be eroding the taboo against it, some observers say.

"We are aware of the realities here, but we in the Joint List decided we want to be part of the political game," says Ms. Khatib Yassin. And she has a message for those Jewish Israelis who tell her that that this will never happen. "We are getting stronger all the time." Palestinian Arab turnout was 67% in the last elections, the highest in more than 20 years.

Ms. Khatib Yassin's rise, and that of the Joint List, is part of a larger story of the social and economic integration of Arab citizens – or Palestinians as many call themselves – into Israeli society. "My national identity is Palestinian, but my civic identity is as an Israeli. I am Israeli in every way. I was born here, grew up here, and became part of this society," says Ms. Khatib Yassin.

Her political awareness dates back to childhood. From the age of five she worked the family fields with her mother and her siblings, growing tomatoes, melons, and tobacco. It was there she first felt the sting of injustice. The government confiscated a piece of her family's

land with a well on it. She would sneak under the fence to fill up the family water bottles.

"This was my first memory of the government – that it prevented us from having a normal life," she says.

She wishes her children had had a chance to grow up in the village. "There was a pride in working the fields, the fruit you held in your hands was a product of your work," she recalls. "We children took pride in the land and our role. I feel it built my personality. From early on I had an understanding that not everything comes easily, but that there is worth in what you do and what you contribute."

She was not always religious, she explains. But when her doctor told her she would not be able to have children she vowed to become observant if she became pregnant. Grateful for her first pregnancy, she became a devout Muslim.

Ms. Khatib Yassin sees political significance in the way Palestinian Arabs in Israel are increasingly returning to their Islamic faith. It is a salve to soothe the pain of the suspicion they face, she believes.

Over the years she has befriended religious Jewish women, including fellow social activists. She sees a common goal to their joint struggle – an equal place for women in conservative religious and political settings.

"I hope we can be a good example of what religious women can do," she says.

[Saudi Arabia] U.S. Revises Indictment of Ex-Twitter Workers Over Saudi Spying (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [7/28/2020 11:36 PM, Joel Rosenblatt, 6400K, Negative]

The U.S. filed a revised indictment against two former Twitter Inc. employees and a Saudi national, alleging the three spied on dissidents for the Middle East country's royal family.

The formal grand jury indictment filed late Tuesday is intended to replace a criminal information, or written accusation, that prosecutors asked a federal court in San Francisco to dismiss earlier in the day.

The two former Twitter employees, Ahmad Abouammo and Ali Alzabarah, are accused of feeding the Saudi government information about Twitter users critical of it. They were recruited by a Saudi named Ahmed Almutairi, who lives in the kingdom and has worked for the royal family's social media company, according to prosecutors.

All three were charged with acting as illegal foreign agents. Of the three, only Abouammo, a U.S. citizen, was arrested. He has pleaded not guilty.

[Saudi Arabia] Hajj Pilgrimage In the Age Of Coronavirus Is Unlike Any Before (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [7/28/2020 11:00 PM, Vivian Nereim and Reema Al Othman, 6400K, Neutral]

Holy water will be consumed from single-use bottles. Pilgrims will get sterilized pebbles to throw at pillars symbolizing the devil. And instead of jostling shoulder to shoulder,

worshippers will circle Mecca's grand mosque with 1.5 meters of space between them.

This year, Islam's annual hajj pilgrimage — which starts on Wednesday — will be unlike any other.

Saudi Arabia has dramatically downsized the ritual because of the coronavirus pandemic, with authorities testing pilgrims and cutting their numbers from the usual 2 million to around 1,000. As a result, this year's pilgrims will be among a lucky few, selected through an online vetting system open only to residents of the kingdom.

"It's such beautiful moment for me," said Faridah Binti Bakti Yahra, a 39-year-old Indonesian mother of three, who was so surprised by the call telling her she'd been chosen that she thought it was a scam. "I couldn't believe it was true."

Hajj is one of the five pillars of Islam, obligatory once in a lifetime for all who are able. Pilgrims often save money for years and apply repeatedly for a spot.

Normally, religious tourism -- of which hajj is only a part -- brings in revenue equivalent to about 2.7% of Saudi Arabia's gross domestic product. But the crowds of people from all over the world are also potential incubators of disease, so the government halted them at the start of the pandemic. Saudi Arabia's coronavirus cases topped 270,000 this week, with daily new cases falling below 2,000 for the first time since early June.

"The main goal is that the pilgrims not be infected," hajj minister Mohammad Banten said in an interview with Saudi television channel Al-Arabiya.

The hajj will be the first large-scale gathering in Mecca's grand mosque in months. Only pilgrims between the age of 20 and 50 without chronic diseases were considered. Before traveling to Mecca, they observed a week-long home quarantine, followed by a four-day quarantine in a Mecca hotel -- receiving meals through room service and communicating with their neighbors over Whatsapp.

When they leave their rooms on Wednesday, they'll be transported on half-empty buses, their possessions packed in identical navy blue suitcases. Usually, as part of the ritual, they would gather rocks to throw at three stone pillars -- a symbolic repelling of evil -- but this year, each pilgrim will be given a packet of sterilized pebbles.

They're also wearing movement-tracking bracelets that connect to their phones via Bluetooth. Yahra laughed as she showed the white band on her wrist during a video call arranged by Saudi authorities; this year, pilgrims are only allowed to communicate with international media through government intermediaries.

More than 160 nationalities will be represented this year, with 30% Saudi and 70% foreign. Their costs are covered by the government.

Other pilgrims interviewed by Bloomberg asked not to be identified by their full names because of the rules about speaking to media.

Alfayik, a 26-year-old student from the Central African Republic, was so shocked he'd been

chosen that he started "jumping and screaming." He'd been applying for five years.

For Yahra, it's particularly bittersweet. After spending a year and a half in Saudi Arabia, her family will return to Indonesia as soon as she finishes the hajj. Like many others during the economic downturn that's accompanied the pandemic, her husband lost his job at an oilfield services company. The movers have already come to gather their belongings.

In addition to supplications she'll make on behalf of friends and family, she has prayers of her own: for the pandemic to end, for her daughters to have a good future, for her husband to find work again.

"I feel like it's a blessing for me before I leave Saudi for good," she said of the pilgrimage. "It's difficult for us."

Europe and Eurasia

[Ireland] A Hong Kong real-estate tycoon wants to build a new city in Ireland for 50,000 emigrants fleeing China's crackdown (Yahoo News/Business Insider)
Yahoo News/Business Insider [7/28/2020 3:57 PM, Taylor Nicole Rogers, 11261K, Neutral]
Hong Kong residents fleeing their home amid China's crackdown might soon have a new place to settle — in the Irish countryside.

Ivan Ko, the founder of charter city investment company Victoria Harbour Group, formulated a plan to build a new city modeled after Hong Kong to house emigrants near Dublin's airport. Ko's new city, which he told The Guardian would be called Nextpolis, would house 50,000 former Hong Kong residents in a 50 square kilometer (31.07 square miles) site located between Dublin and Belfast, complete with Cantonese-speaking schools.

"We like Ireland," Ko told The Guardian's Rory Carroll. "Corporate taxes are very low. You have very strong manufacturing and biomedical companies. Major tech giants have European headquarters there. Overall we think Ireland is very good."

Ko had originally planned for a 500,000-person Nextpolis that would be semi-autonomous like his native Hong Kong, but dropped that aspect of the plan after consulting with the Irish government starting in December 2019, per The Guardian. A spokesperson for the Irish Department of foreign services told The Guardian that Irish officials had had limited contact with Ko's team "to provide helpful and realistic guidance about Ireland."

Hong Kong has been gripped by unrest since mass protests broke out over an extradition bill in March 2019, and later morphed to oppose new national security laws that criminalize dissent, Business Insider previously reported. City residents are expected to emigrate in large numbers as China continues to tighten its grip on the one-time British colony with little regard for condemnations from the west.

Both the UK and Australia have made special immigration provisions for Hong Kong residents looking to relocate, per Fox News, and Nextpolis' proposed location would allow immigrants to live in Belfast and take advantage of the UK's path to citizenship for select Hong Kongers.

"We are in pursuit of freedom and democracy, which is a little bit similar to the pilgrims and the puritans who left Europe in pursuit of religious freedom," Ko said while describing the project on his podcast, per The Guardian.

[Russia] Russian Intelligence Agencies Push Disinformation on Pandemic (New York Times)

New York Times [7/29/2020 12:00 AM, Julian E. Barnes and David E. Sanger, Neutral] Russian intelligence services have been spreading disinformation about the coronavirus pandemic, according to newly declassified intelligence, material that demonstrates how Moscow is continuing to try to influence Americans as the election draws closer.

Russian military intelligence, known as the G.R.U., has used its ties with a Russian government information center, InfoRos, and other websites to push out English-language disinformation and propaganda about the pandemic, such as amplifying false Chinese arguments that the virus was created by the United States military and articles that said Russia's medical assistance could bring a new détente with Washington.

The disinformation efforts are a refinement of what Russia tried to do in 2016. The fake social media accounts and bots used by the Internet Research Agency and other Russia-backed groups to amplify false articles have proved relatively easy to stamp out. But it is far more difficult to stop the dissemination of such articles that appear on websites that seem legitimate, according to outside experts.

"Russian intelligence agencies are taking a more central role in disinformation efforts that Russia is pushing now," said Laura Rosenberger, the director of the Alliance for Securing Democracy. "It is not the blunt force" of the operations mounted by the Internet Research Agency. Two American officials described the newly declassified intelligence but would not provide the underlying reports about the activities of the G.R.U. and the S.V.R., Moscow's equivalent of the C.I.A. They discussed the information on the condition of anonymity.

Last week, intelligence officials warned about Russian, Chinese and Iranian efforts to interfere with the election. While Democrats criticized the warning for a lack of specifics, officials promised to release more information. While the disinformation efforts outlined on Tuesday by American officials were focused on the pandemic, security researchers said Russia continued to push disinformation on a variety of topics.

The government's accusations came as Mandiant Threat Intelligence, part of the FireEye cybersecurity firm, reported that it had detected a parallel influence campaign in Eastern Europe intended to discredit the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, including disinformation about the coronavirus. While the Mandiant report did not specifically name Russia and its intelligence agencies, it noted that the campaign was "aligned with Russian security interests" in an effort to undermine NATO activities.

Facebook has begun labeling stories that appear on state-sponsored news sites like RT and Sputnik. But it is harder for the social media companies to identify and label news articles that are posted on conspiracy-minded sites, according to experts. Many of the pieces created by Russian intelligence were published on InfoRos, a site controlled by the

Russian government, and OneWorld.Press, a nominally independent site that United States officials said had ties to the G.R.U. American officials said other sites, such as GlobalResearch.ca, regularly amplify G.R.U. propaganda, but officials have not directly linked it to Russian intelligence.

United States government officials mostly described disinformation focused on the pandemic, but they also outlined ties between Russian intelligence and a think tank that had published articles on politics.

The Strategic Culture Foundation is directed by another Russian intelligence agency, the S.V.R., according to two American officials. The foundation and its ties to Russian intelligence are also being investigated by the F.B.I., according to another official.

In May, the foundation published an article critical of Evelyn Farkas, a former Obama administration official who lost a primary race in June in New York for a seat in Congress.

Ms. Farkas said the Russians were continuing to repeat their efforts from 2016 to try to influence the election.

"They want to sow dissent and reduce confidence among Americans in our democracy and make democracy look bad worldwide," she said. "They want to prevent people who are tough on Russia from coming into power."

Michael Averko, a contributor to the foundation, did not return a request for comment, but he said in a recent mass email to reporters that he had been visited by the F.B.I. Mr. Averko said he told the F.B.I. that he did not know about any ties between the foundation and Russian intelligence, but that he doubted they existed. After the publication of this article, OneWorld.Press issued a statement saying any accusation that it worked for Russian intelligence was "categorically false." "To the best of our knowledge," its contributors have not been charged with crimes for cooperating with any foreign intelligence agency, the statement said.

Without evidence, OneWorld.Press claimed that the accusations about Russian intelligence's propaganda efforts were being spread by officials who aimed to hurt President Trump's re-election chances. "Everybody across the world knows that some members of the 'deep state' have their daggers out for Trump, and the president himself has even said as much on countless occasions," it said.

American intelligence officials said the G.R.U.'s psychological warfare unit, known as Unit 54777 or the 72nd Special Service Center, was behind the propaganda campaigns that were often devised to obscure Moscow's role in creating them. A 2018 report in The Washington Post linked InfoRos to the G.R.U.'s Unit 54777.

United States intelligence reports have identified two Russians, Denis V. Tyurin and Aleksandr G. Starunskiy, with ties to the G.R.U. and who make sure the messaging and disinformation drafted by the intelligence officials are pushed by InfoRos and on InfoBrics.org and OneWorld.Press.

Russian officials did not immediately return a request for comment.

Mr. Tyurin and Mr. Starunskiy, the American officials said, were in essence involved in a kind of information laundering, akin to money laundering. They take the messages from Russian intelligence and spread them on InfoRos, OnePress or another website.

The material created by the G.R.U. is then picked up by other websites that further spread it. Those websites are often on the fringes of the web, while some, like Global Research, have a significant following, American officials said.

The stories pushed by Russian intelligence appear to be written by native English speakers and do not stand out as products of a foreign influence campaign, American officials said. From late May to early July, about 150 articles on the pandemic were published by the Russian intelligence-backed effort, American officials said.

OneWorld published pieces about how the pandemic was an experiment in manipulating the world. InfoRos, as well as the Tass news agency, published an article that said the United States was using the pandemic to impose its view of the world, according to American officials. InfoBrics.org published reports about Beijing's contention that the coronavirus was originally an American biological weapon.

While the specific sites may not receive much traffic, American officials believe the disinformation written by Russian military intelligence is amplified, sometimes intentionally, sometimes unwittingly.

Tracking the influence of Russian disinformation is difficult. While documents stolen and published by Russian intelligence agencies had an important effect on the 2016 presidential campaign in the United States, the social media posts do not seem to have been as consequential.

But propaganda and disinformation published on alternative news sites, like OneWorld or Global Research, may have more traction, some researchers believe.

"What we have seen from G.R.U. operations is oftentimes the social media component is a flop, but the narrative content that they write is shared more broadly through the niche media ecosystem," said Renee DiResta, a research manager at the Stanford Internet Observatory, who has studied the G.R.U. and InfoRos ties and propaganda work.

The EU DisinfoLab, an independent nonprofit organization, has previously linked OneWorld, InfoRos and a French-language site to Russian propaganda efforts. Some of that disinformation centered on allied troops spreading the coronavirus, allegations similar to those in the new Mandiant report. Mandiant called the threat group it found "Ghostwriter," since it relied on false news articles or made-up letters and quotations that appeared to originate with local politicians or military officials. It relied on articles written by what it called "at least 14 inauthentic personas," meaning reporters or blog writers who were invented by the creators of the influence campaign. The articles were published by pro-Russian sites like TheDuran.com, which American intelligence officials have also been examining.

In one example, a fabricated letter presented as being written by the secretary general of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg, perpetuated the false claim that the alliance was planning to leave

Lithuania as the pandemic spread. Another episode involved a local Lithuanian news site that was hacked, and attackers posted an article that falsely claimed German troops had desecrated a Jewish cemetery in Kaunas, a city in central Lithuania.

[Russia] Russia prepares for worlds first approval of a Covid-19 vaccine by mid-August, but questions remain (CNN)

CNN [7/28/2020 7:50 PM, Matthew Chance, 7975K, Neutral]

Russia intends to be the first in the world to approve a coronavirus vaccine, in less than two weeks -- despite concerns about its safety, effectiveness and over whether the country has cut essential corners in development, CNN has learned.

Russian officials told CNN they are working toward a date of August 10 or earlier for approval of the vaccine, which has been created by the Moscow-based Gamaleya Institute. It will be approved for public use, with frontline healthcare workers getting it first, they said.

"It's a Sputnik moment," said Kirill Dmitriev, head of Russia's sovereign wealth fund, which is financing Russian vaccine research, referring to the successful 1957 launch of the world's first satellite by the Soviet Union.

"Americans were surprised when they heard Sputnik's beeping. It's the same with this vaccine. Russia will have got there first," he added.

But Russia has released no scientific data on its vaccine testing and CNN is unable to verify its claimed safety or effectiveness. Critics say the country's push for a vaccine comes amid political pressure from the Kremlin, which is keen to portray Russia as a global scientific force.

There are also wide concerns the human testing of the vaccine is incomplete.

Dozens of vaccine trials are underway around the world and a small number are in large-scale efficacy trials, but most developers have cautioned that much work remains before their vaccines can be approved.

While some global vaccines are in the third phase of trials, the Russian vaccine is yet to complete its second phase. Developers plan to complete that phase by August 3, and then conduct the third phase of testing in parallel with the vaccination of the medical workers.

Russians scientists say the vaccine has been quick to develop because it is a modified version of one already created to fight against other diseases. That's the approach being taken in many other countries and by other companies.

Notably, Moderna, whose vaccine is being backed by the U.S. government and which started Phase 3 testing Monday, has built its coronavirus vaccine on the backbone of a vaccine it had been developing for a related virus, MERS. While this has sped the development process, US and European regulators are requiring the full complement of safety and efficacy tests for the vaccine.

Russia's defense ministry says that Russian soldiers served as volunteers in human trials.

In recorded comments provided to CNN, Alexander Ginsburg, the director of the project,

said he has already injected himself with the vaccine.

Russian officials say the drug is being fast-tracked through approval because of the global pandemic and Russia's own severe coronavirus problem. The country now has more than 800,000 confirmed cases.

"Our scientists focused not on being the first but on protecting people," said Dmitriev. The vaccine uses human adenovirus vectors that have been made weaker so they do not replicate in the body. Unlike most vaccines in development it relies on two vectors, not one, and patients would receive a second booster shot.

Officials say their scientific data is currently being compiled and will be made available for peer review and publication in early August.

"Russia marshaled its leadership position in vaccine development and its proven Ebola and MERS vaccine platform to bring the first safe and efficient solution to the world's biggest problem," Dmitriev told CNN previously.

The World Health Organization says there is no approved vaccine for MERS.

The Russian health ministry, which has not yet confirmed the August approval date, says frontline medical staff will be first to be vaccinated once the new drug has been approved for public use.

Large-scale vaccine trials in the United Kingdom, the United States and elsewhere are proceeding rapidly but have not committed to deadlines by which their products will be approved.

Early results from trials of a vaccine developed by the University of Oxford and AstraZeneca were promising, but Mike Ryan, executive director of the World Health Organization Health Emergencies Program, said earlier this month that "there's a long way to go."

"These are Phase 1 studies. We now need to move into larger scale real-world trials, but it is good to see more data and more products moving into this very important phase of vaccine discovery," he said.

Earlier this month, the Kremlin denied allegations Russian spies hacked into American, Canadian and British research labs to steal vaccine development secrets.

Russian officials also denied reports members of the country's political and business elite -- including Russian President Vladimir Putin -- had been given early access to the vaccine.

[United Kingdom] Huawei executives accused of snubbing Commons Defence Committee over 5G (Yahoo News/The Telegraph)

[Yahoo News/The Telegraph](#) [7/28/2020 1:23 PM, Danielle Sheridan, 11261K, Neutral]

Huawei executives were last night accused of snubbing the Commons Defence Committee over 5G weeks after it received a grilling over freedom of speech.

The Daily Telegraph understands that Jeremy Thompson and Victor Zhang, vice presidents

of Huawei UK and Dr Yao Wenbing, vice president of business development, were all expected to give evidence before the committee, as they had done earlier this month when invited by the Science & Technology committee.

During the meeting the executives refused to comment on the row with China over Hong Kong only moments after insisting that the company's UK leaders were free to express their opinions.

Days later Oliver Dowden, the Culture Secretary, confirmed the UK would ban Huawei from the its 5G network and set a new deadline for stripping it out of all infrastructure at the cost of £2bn, by 2027.

Tobias Ellwood, chairman of the Defence Select Committee, told those gathered at Tuesday's meeting: "Huawei were supposed to join us, unfortunately they've declined to be here. This might be connected to the recent announcement in July. I'm sure they're here in spirit, if not, I'm certain they're going to be listening."

Meanwhile, executives from BT and Vodafone who did attend the committee warned that bringing forward the date by which they must remove Huawei equipment from 5G networks risked significant service blackouts.

Mark Francois, a former armed forces minister, suggested backbench MPs could seek to amend the bill dictating the timeframe for Huawei's removal from 5G in the UK, and said he "wouldn't be surprised" if the current cut-off date of 2027 was amended to 2023 "whether the Government likes it or not".

However BT's chief technology officer Howard Watson warned against such approach, which he said "would cause significant mobile network outages".

He added that was the "wrong thing to do for the nation given the dependence that we've all found on our telecommunications networks through the time that we've been through in the last four or five months".

[United Kingdom] UK pension scheme NEST tightens climate change policy (Reuters)
Reuters [7/28/2020 7:01 PM, Simon Jessop, 5304K, Neutral]

Nest, Britain's largest pension scheme by number of members, said on Wednesday it would toughen up its climate change investing policy and aimed to fully decarbonise its portfolio by 2050.

The move by the scheme, which invests the retirement savings of 9 million workers, is one of the most ambitious to date and comes as regulatory pressure builds for the industry to better manage climate-related risk.

As well as the effects of climate change such as rising sea levels and more extreme weather, companies are at risk of costs associated with regulatory change and litigation linked to the transition to a low-carbon economy.

"Just like coronavirus, climate change poses serious risks to both our savers and their

investments. It has the potential to cause catastrophic damage and completely disrupt our way of life," said Mark Fawcett, Nest's Chief Investment Officer.

"No-one wants to save throughout their life to retire into a world devastated by climate change," he added.

Nest said it would immediately move 5.5 billion pounds in shares, or around 45% of its portfolio, to so-called 'climate aware' strategies, containing companies likely to prove winners in the energy transition.

The move would be the equivalent to taking 200,000 cars off the road or heating 50,000 households for a year through renewable energy, Nest said in a statement.

Nest also said there were some business activities it did not believe could ever be aligned with the goals of the Paris Climate Agreement, which aims to limit the rise in global temperatures.

As a result, it said it would begin divesting from companies involved in thermal coal, oil sands and Arctic drilling.

Companies with more than 20% of revenues from these activities would be sold by the end of 2020 and those with more than 10% of revenues by 2023, with the remainder by 2025 if they had not put in place a full, accountable phase-out by 2030.

Nest also said it would also invest more of its assets directly into green infrastructure projects such as renewable energy and push its external fund managers to help it halve emissions by 2030.

Nest said it would pressure all its investee companies to align with the goals of the Paris Agreement and would divest from those that did not move quickly enough.

East Asia and Pacific

Deadly land conflicts seen rising as threat from industry grows (Reuters)

Reuters [7/28/2020 8:04 PM, Rina Chandran, 5304K, Negative]

At least 212 people were killed last year while defending their land from being taken over by industry, Global Witness said on Wednesday, the deadliest year since the advocacy group began compiling data in 2012.

More than half the killings were in Colombia and the Philippines and indigenous people made up 40% of the victims, the Britain-based group said in a report. It was a significant rise on 2018, when 164 killings were recorded.

The threat from mining and large-scale agriculture caused the most number of deaths, with these sectors also responsible for worsening climate change impacts, Global Witness said.

"Insecure land tenure, irresponsible business practices and government policies that prioritise extractive economies at the cost of human rights are putting people, and their land,

at risk," said Rachel Cox, a campaigner at Global Witness.

"Land and environmental defenders play a vital role in protecting climate-critical forests and ecosystems. When they take a stand against the theft of their land, or the destruction of forests, they are increasingly being killed," she said.

Latin America accounted for more than two-thirds of all victims last year, with Colombia the deadliest country of all, with 64 killings.

In Asia, the Philippines had 43 killings compared to 30 the previous year, with six in India, three in Indonesia and one in Cambodia, according to Global Witness.

Many more were attacked, arrested, threatened and sued, said Global Witness, which recorded killings in 21 countries.

In the Philippines - which was the deadliest country in 2018 - "relentless vilification" of activists by the government and impunity for attackers may be spurring an increase in killings, it said.

A spokesman for President Rodrigo Duterte did not respond to requests for comment.

At least 119 activists and farmers have been killed since Duterte took office in 2016, according to Global Witness, while local campaign groups put the figure at about 200.

Dozens of United Nations experts last month called for an independent investigation into human rights violations in the Philippines, including killings of farmers and indigenous people.

The coronavirus pandemic has accelerated the "downward spiral of the human rights situation", and a new anti-terrorism bill could be used to target activists, they said.

"Days after the act was signed, the harassment of human rights defenders has visibly worsened," said Cristina Palabay, secretary general of Philippine human rights advocacy group Karapatan.

"While rural communities, including indigenous peoples, grapple with the impact of COVID-19, they are constantly hounded by military operations that benefit mining corporations encroaching on their ancestral land," she said.

Two of the country's biggest agribusiness brands - Dole Philippines and Del Monte Philippines - earlier this year said they would review their processes to better protect land rights.

But attacks against activists during coronavirus lockdowns signalled more violence worldwide, Cox said.

"Governments around the world have used the crisis to strengthen draconian measures to control citizens and roll back hard-fought environmental regulations," Cox told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"This a more worrying time than ever."

Philippines: deadliest country in Asia for land defenders (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [7/28/2020 8:02 PM, Staff, 11261K, Negative]

The Philippines was the deadliest country in Asia for land and environmental defenders again last year while slipping to second most dangerous in the world behind Colombia, a watchdog said Wednesday.

A total of 43 defenders were killed in the archipelago -- the vast majority on the fertile and resource-rich islands of Mindanao and Negros -- compared with 30 in 2018, Global Witness said in a report.

Nearly half of the killings recorded since President Rodrigo Duterte took power in 2016 have been linked to the armed forces or paramilitary groups, it said.

- Who is being killed? -

Indigenous leaders, farmers and state employees charged with protecting the environment were among the victims.

More than half the deaths were related to agribusiness, Global Witness said. Sixteen killings were linked to mining -- the highest in the world.

Nearly half of those killed lived on Mindanao, where the army has long maintained a heavy presence in the fight against communist and Muslim insurgents.

The island was under martial law until the end of last year.

Large numbers of defenders were also killed on Negros, a sugar-producing island in the central Philippines that is also heavily militarised and where activists have long campaigned for land reform to reduce inequality and poverty.

"Defenders living in Mindanao and Negros made up almost 90 percent of land and environmental activists killed in the country in 2019," the report said.

Kaylo Bontolan, a leader of the Manobo tribe on Mindanao, was among them.

He was killed in a military airstrike in April last year when he returned to his mountain home to help document violence against fellow tribe members.

"Like Datu Kaylo, many of those killed were indigenous people asserting their right to self-determination and their ancestral lands," the report said.

- What's at stake? -

The impact of climate change has dialled up the pressure on defenders as they seek to protect indigenous land rights and stop commercial loggers and miners destroying pristine

rainforests and polluting the environment.

"Rising temperatures, landslides and increasingly dangerous typhoons make the Philippines the country most at-risk of multiple climate hazards," Global Witness warned.

While Duterte's government has acknowledged the environmental threats to the country, the reality is "business as usual", it said.

"Large companies, influential politicians and established landowners continue to make money with brazen disregard for the rights and wellbeing of local communities, and the lives of activists," the report said.

An example, it noted, was the planned China-backed construction of an \$800 million hydropower dam on indigenous land in Mindanao that will displace more than 700 households, who say they were not consulted.

- Is it more dangerous under Duterte? -

The report says 119 defenders were killed during Duterte's first three years in office -- almost twice the number compared with the three years before he took power.

While defenders have long faced deadly reprisals for their efforts, Global Witness said the Duterte administration's "relentless vilification" of them and widespread impunity for offenders could be driving the increase.

The report highlighted the practice of "red-tagging" activists and environmental groups -- accusing them of being rebels or communist sympathisers -- which it said was part of a broader global trend to delegitimise communities' concerns.

A new anti-terrorism law that gives security forces sweeping powers to go after groups or individuals could put government critics, including defenders, at risk of prosecution, it added.

[Australia] Sydney Declared Virus Hotspot, Triggering State Visitor Ban (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [7/28/2020 9:53 PM, Jason Scott, 6400K, Negative]

Australia's most-populous city has been declared a coronavirus hotspot, with Queensland state announcing it will close its borders to all visitors from Sydney on Saturday.

Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk's decision on Wednesday came after two 19-year-old women tested positive for Covid-19 following their return to Queensland from visits to Melbourne, the center of Australia's resurgence in the pandemic, via Sydney. The pair had failed to isolate for 14 days as required on their return.

The two women circulated in the community for eight days before testing positive to Covid-19, triggering the closure of a school and an aged-care facility that they visited for two days, in order for deep cleaning to take place.

"The next 24-48 hours is crucial in Queensland because we need to be making sure that

any of those people who may have come into contact with the two confirmed cases need to go into quarantine and also need to be tested," Palaszczyk told reporters.

Palaszczyk said she was "absolutely furious" with the breaches and the two women would be investigated by police for allegedly giving misleading information to authorities.

New South Wales state, which has Sydney as its capital, recorded 19 new cases of the virus on Wednesday.

Victoria state, where the capital Melbourne was forced into a second lockdown, on Tuesday reported 384 new cases and 295 on Wednesday, down from Monday's record of 532 new cases.

The state said Tuesday it will suspend all but the most urgent elective surgeries in Melbourne as it seeks to free up hospital beds and nurses to fight a spike in cases in aged-care homes.

As of Wednesday, Victoria had 804 cases connected to aged-care, and seven of the nine fatalities posted in the previous 24 hours were connected to the sector.

[Australia] Emergency response team dispatched to Australia coronavirus outbreak (Reuters)

Reuters [7/28/2020 8:37 PM, Renju Jose and Sonali Paul, 11261K, Negative]

Australian officials have sent an emergency medical team, usually deployed to disaster zones, to aged care homes in the city of Melbourne to try help contain a rapidly spreading outbreak of the coronavirus.

Another hotspot, in inner-city Sydney, has forced a senior adviser to Prime Minister Scott Morrison into self-isolation.

Australia has so far reported relatively fewer coronavirus cases than many other countries, but a spike in community transmission in the southeast states of Victoria and New South Wales has alarmed health officials.

Aged care homes are at the centre of the Victoria outbreak. National Deputy Chief Medical Officer Nick Coatsworth said there were 679 active COVID-19 cases linked to the homes, including workers.

"The numbers of cases in some facilities is substantial and that is going to take some time to get on top of," Coatsworth told Australian Broadcasting Corp television.

Asked if Australia should expect to see similar rates of death from the virus in aged care facilities as those recorded overseas - some as high as one-in-five - he said it was critical to "get these outbreaks under control as quickly as possible."

Coatsworth said an Australian Medical Assistance Team (AUSMAT) was on its way to help deal with the crisis. AUSMAT teams generally include doctors, nurses, paramedics, radiographers and pharmacists.

At one facility, several residents were transferred to hospital by helicopter on Tuesday and army medics were sent in to cover staff who are self-isolating.

In Sydney, officials are grappling with several virus clusters that have sprung up at pubs, restaurants and schools.

Morrison's office confirmed that a senior aide was among those told to self-isolate after an outbreak in the inner-city suburb of Potts Point.

Morrison, who cut short an interstate tour on Tuesday to deal with the crisis, was cleared to continue working as usual given the aide had no COVID-19 symptoms, his office added.

Australia has recorded just over 15,300 cases and 167 deaths as of Tuesday.

[Australia] Emergency teams sent to tackle Australia's worst virus outbreak in aged homes (Reuters)

Reuters [7/28/2020 11:59 PM, Sonali Paul and Renju Jose, 5304K, Negative]

Australia has sent defence and emergency medical teams, usually deployed to disaster zones, to aged care homes in the city of Melbourne to help contain the country's worst outbreak of the coronavirus.

Another hotspot, in inner-city Sydney, forced a senior adviser to Prime Minister Scott Morrison into self-isolation, but the prime minister has been cleared to continue working.

Queensland barred anyone from Sydney from entering the state and locked down suburbs south of its capital, Brisbane, on Wednesday after two young women tested positive for COVID-19 after returning from Melbourne and not quarantining.

Australia has reported far fewer coronavirus cases than many other countries, with just over 15,300 confirmed infections and 167 deaths as of Tuesday.

But a spike in community transmission in the most populous southeast states of Victoria and New South Wales (NSW) has alarmed health officials and the government who fear a second wave just as the country was reopening.

Victoria reported 295 new cases on Wednesday, down from 532 on Monday, and nine deaths, including seven in aged care. The state has a total of 9,304 cases.

Aged care homes are at the centre of the Victoria outbreak, with 804 active COVID-19 cases linked to the homes, including workers, state premier Daniel Andrews said.

"The most tragic part of this outbreak is there have been 49 deaths in aged care. That is a terrible tragedy and there will be more," Australia's health secretary, Brendan Murphy, told reporters.

At one facility, several residents were transferred to hospital by helicopter on Tuesday and army medics were sent in to cover staff who are self-isolating.

NSW reported 19 new cases, including two in hotel quarantine, raising the state's total cases to 3,529. The state capital Sydney is grappling with several clusters that have sprung up at pubs, restaurants and schools.

Morrison called the situation in 13 Victorian aged care facilities "very distressing". The outbreaks have largely been due to transmission from workers at the homes, many of whom might not have been aware they were carrying the virus.

"When it rains, everyone gets wet. And that is what we're seeing with broad-based community transmission in Victoria," Morrison said.

The government has sent 1,400 military personnel and five emergency teams to Melbourne to help deal with the aged care issues, including contact tracing.

Melbourne, the country's second most populous city, is in the midst of reimposed lockdown that has stalled the reopening of businesses, forced other states to shut borders with Victoria and held off reopening travel with New Zealand.

"There is a significant Victorian wave, but that Victorian wave is impacting the national economy more broadly," Morrison said in a televised media conference.

Australia has entered its first recession since the early 1990s, with the budget set to plunge to its biggest deficit since World War Two, as the government has rolled out hundreds of billions of dollars in spending to boost the economy.

"It's in the national interest, from a health perspective and economic perspective, that we ensure that Victoria wins here," said Morrison.

[Australia] Australia's Victoria reports nine coronavirus deaths, daily cases dip (Reuters)

Reuters [7/28/2020 10:40 PM, Renju Jose, 11261K, Negative]

Australia's second most populous state of Victoria said on Wednesday the total daily coronavirus cases fell below 300 for the first time in more than a week.

The state reported nine deaths from the coronavirus over the last 24 hours with seven casualties linked to aged care facilities, Premier Daniel Andrews said in a media conference in Melbourne.

The southeast state saw a flare-up in infections over the last several weeks and authorities have sent an emergency medical team to aged care homes, which are at the centre of the outbreak.

Victoria reported 295 COVID-19 cases in the last 24 hours, compared with 384 a day earlier.

[Australia] Australia Fast-Tracks Plan to Send Solar Power to Singapore (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [7/28/2020 10:14 PM, Dan Murtaugh, 6400K, Positive]

Australia granted "major project status" to an ambitious A\$22 billion (\$16 billion) plan to export power from a giant solar farm in the country's north to Southeast Asia via undersea cable.

The status recognizes the "strategic significance" of the project, which is expected to inject billions of dollars into the economy and create thousands of jobs, Angus Taylor, minister for energy and emissions reduction, said in a statement Wednesday.

The Australia-ASEAN Power Link envisions connecting the world's largest solar farm and battery system in Australia's Northern Territory to Singapore and Indonesia via a 3,700 kilometer (2,300 mile) undersea cable. Similar proposals for long-haul, transnational power shipments have been pursued in other regions, including from North Africa to Europe or from Mongolia to Japan and South Korea.

The high-profile boost by the Australian government contrasts with the relatively muted interest from Singapore, which is expected to be its main customer. The city-state's Energy Market Authority acknowledged in November that it had met with the project's developer, Sun Cable Pty Ltd., but has shown little public appetite in the venture. The EMA didn't immediately respond to a request for comment Wednesday.

Sun Cable says the project can supply a fifth of Singapore's power needs, helping to reduce the city-state's reliance on natural gas imports. The project, which is backed by Atlassian co-founder Mike Cannon-Brookes and Fortescue Metals' founder Andrew Forrest, plans to start marine survey work from August. The company is targeting commercial operations to begin in 2027.

The major project status will provide the Sun Cable project with government support that includes a single entry point for national approvals and assistance with state and territory approvals.

[China] The Vatican Is Said to Be Hacked From China Before Talks With Beijing (New York Times)

New York Times [7/28/2020 8:53 PM, David E. Sanger, Edward Wong and Jason Horowitz, 28290K, Neutral]

Chinese hackers infiltrated the Vatican's computer networks in the past three months, a private monitoring group has concluded, in an apparent espionage effort before the beginning of sensitive negotiations with Beijing.

The attack was detected by Recorded Future, a firm based in Somerville, Mass. The Chinese Communist Party has been waging a broad campaign to tighten its grip on religious groups, in what government leaders have periodically referred to as an effort to "Sinicize religions" in the country.

China officially recognizes five religions, including Catholicism, but the authorities often suspect religious groups and worshippers of undermining the control of the Communist Party and the state, and of threatening the country's national security.

Chinese hackers and state authorities have often used cyberattacks to try to gather

information on groups of Buddhist Tibetans, Muslim Uighurs and Falun Gong practitioners outside China.

But this appears to be the first time that hackers, presumed by cybersecurity experts at Recorded Future to be working for the Chinese state, have been publicly caught directly hacking into the Vatican and the Holy See's Study Mission to China, the Hong Kong-based group of de facto Vatican representatives who have played a role in negotiating the Catholic Church's status.

The Vatican and Beijing are expected to start talks in September over control of the appointment of bishops and the status of houses of worship as part of a renewal of a provisional agreement signed in 2018 that revised the terms of the Catholic Church's operations in China.

The series of intrusions began in early May. One attack was hidden inside a document that appeared to be a legitimate letter from the Vatican to Msgr. Javier Corona Herrera, the chaplain who heads the study mission in Hong Kong, Recorded Future said in a report to be released on Wednesday.

It was an artful deception: an electronic file that looked as if it was on the official stationery of Archbishop Edgar Peña Parra. The letter carried a message from Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican's secretary of state, the pope's second in command and an old China hand who has defended the deal. In his message, Cardinal Parolin expressed the pope's sadness about the death of a bishop.

It is unclear whether the letter was fabricated or a real document that the attackers had obtained and then linked to malware that gave them access to the computers of the Hong Kong church offices and the Vatican's mail servers. Recorded Future concluded that the attack was most likely connected to negotiations over the extension of the 2018 agreement.

In a recent interview with an Italian television program, Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli, a key negotiator of the agreement, said that with the provisional agreement set to expire in September, the Holy See "wants to continue with this step, it wants to go forward."

Matteo Bruni, the Vatican spokesman, did not respond to a request for comment Tuesday evening, and top Vatican officials with experience dealing with China declined to comment because they said they did not have sufficient information about the alleged hack.

The revelation comes at a moment when the Trump administration is in near daily confrontation with China over the handling of the coronavirus pandemic, closures of diplomatic missions, Beijing's campaign to claim vast swaths of the South China Sea and American efforts to limit Chinese technological advances in the United States and its allies, especially for installing next-generation communications gear.

But there is no indication that the Trump administration was involved in the report about the attacks on the Vatican.

Recorded Future concluded that the attack was carried out by a state-sponsored group in China, which it named RedDelta. It said that the tactics used by the group were similar to

those of other state-sponsored hacking operations that had been identified in the past. But there were also new techniques and new computer code, and identifying the true source of a hack is difficult.

The revelations are certain to anger the Vatican as its relationship with the Chinese government has been enormously delicate, especially over China's crackdown on Hong Kong. When the Vatican issued prepared remarks on July 5 for Pope Francis's blessing at St. Peter's Square, it included a message to the people of Hong Kong, saying the current standoff "requires courage, humility, nonviolence and respect for the dignity and rights of all. I hope that social and especially religious life may be expressed in full and true liberty, as indeed several international documents foresee."

But in the end, the pope did not deliver those words when he spoke.

The negotiations between the Vatican and Beijing would follow on the provisional agreement of 2018. The deal, the details of which are still largely unknown, was aimed at laying the foundation for a process by which the pope and the Chinese authorities could agree on bishops appointed to the head of official churches in China. As part of the deal, Pope Francis agreed to recognize several bishops who had been appointed by the Chinese government.

At the time, both sides said it was a starting point for deeper talks, and the Vatican praised it as leading to a rapprochement between the official churches in China and the Holy See. In China, churches for various Christian denominations, including Roman Catholicism, are either sanctioned by the Chinese government, which appoints or approves clerical leaders, or underground ones. The underground Catholic Churches have been loyal to the Vatican, and they are overseen by bishops secretly appointed by the pope.

The 2018 agreement reportedly allowed Beijing to name bishop candidates to the official churches but gave the pope final say over the appointments. This was understood to be the process moving forward after the pope recognized several bishops appointed by Chinese officials. Those bishops had been excommunicated by the Vatican.

Critics of the agreement denounced the Vatican for dealing with an authoritarian government and endowing Beijing with greater legitimacy, allowing it potentially more influence over the religious lives of China's 10 million to 12 million Catholics. Some prominent American politicians, such as Senator Marco Rubio, Republican of Florida, have been among those urging the Vatican to refrain from dealing with the Chinese Communist Party.

Under the rule of Xi Jinping, the Chinese leader, the party has tightened its control over the nation's religious and spiritual life as part of a drive that Mr. Xi has led to increase party oversight in almost every aspect of society. Officials in southeastern China have imposed especially harsh restrictions on the practice of Christianity. From 2014 to 2016, the authorities in Zhejiang Province, where Mr. Xi once served as party chief, ordered crosses to be torn down from 1,200 to 1,700 churches, according to officials and residents there.

The Vatican has had a fraught relationship with Beijing for decades.

The two severed diplomatic ties in 1951, and the Vatican officially recognizes Taiwan, the democratic island that has de facto independence from China. In recent years, Chinese officials have increasingly pressured the handful of governments around the world that recognize Taiwan to end those relationships, with some success. If the Vatican and Beijing move to restore diplomatic ties, Chinese officials would almost certainly demand that the Vatican end relations with Taiwan.

Pope Francis had made it a goal to increase the church's presence around the world. In China, Protestantism has been growing at a much faster rate than Catholicism.

In 2014, the Chinese government allowed the pope's airplane to fly through Chinese airspace on its way to Seoul, South Korea, breaking with tradition. The pope broadcast via radio telegram a message to Mr. Xi, offering well wishes and blessings of peace. While addressing bishops outside Seoul, the pope said: "In this spirit of openness to others, I earnestly hope that those countries of your continent with whom the Holy See does not yet enjoy a full relationship may not hesitate to further a dialogue for the benefit of all."

The hackers might have tried to penetrate the systems of the study mission in Hong Kong not only to try to obtain information on the upcoming negotiations, but also to monitor the group during a period of intense unrest in the city.

Since June 2019, large pro-democracy protests have unfolded in the territory. In May, the National People's Congress in Beijing authorized the enactment of a national security law in Hong Kong that would give the authorities greater tools of repression. Officials imposed the law in June.

Throughout the protests in Hong Kong, officials have suspected churches of helping organize demonstrators and giving them aid.

Chinese hackers have tried to aid the Hong Kong authorities in cracking down on the protests, including by carrying out cyberattacks on Telegram, a secure messaging app used by many demonstrators. ZDNet reported this month that members of the Hong Kong Catholic Church had been targeted since May with malware by hackers believed to be associated with China.

[China] Vatican computers hacked in Chinese espionage effort, cybersecurity firm says (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [7/28/2020 10:44 PM, Spncer Neale, 394K, Negative]

Hackers working for the Chinese Communist Party allegedly accessed the private computing network of the Vatican for several months ahead of a September meeting to discuss the appointment of bishops in the Asian country.

Analysts with Recorded Future, a Massachusetts-based cybersecurity company, said they had detected an attack on Vatican computers in which Chinese infiltrators accessed communications between high-ranking officials in the church, who openly discussed upcoming negotiations pertaining to the pope's role in confirming bishops to the heads of Chinese churches, the New York Times reported Tuesday.

According to a Recorded Future report set for release on Wednesday, the espionage tactics began in early May. The firm outlined how one electronic file was masked in such a way that it appeared as if it was sent from the Vatican to Monsignor Javier Corona Herrera, the head chaplain of the Holy See's Study Mission in Hong Kong.

Malware attached to the message allowed hackers to gain access to the Holy See's Study Mission servers and private servers at the Vatican.

Recorded Future analysts suggested the intrusion was performed by a CCP-backed group they named RedDelta.

The alleged espionage comes at a delicate junction between the two states as crackdowns in Hong Kong have exacerbated the tenuous relationship between the Vatican and China.

[China] Mystery Seeds Postmarked From China to Be Tested by U.S. Officials (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [7/28/2020 7:15 PM, Jesse Newman, Neutral]

Federal officials are preparing to test seeds that have been appearing in mailboxes across the country to determine whether they could be harmful to U.S. agriculture or the environment.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture is planning to test the seeds following reports that hundreds of people are receiving such packages in the mail that they didn't order. Since last week, dozens of states from Florida to Nevada have warned residents about the unsolicited seed packages that appear to be mostly from China. State and federal officials have urged people not to plant the seeds, which they say could be invasive plant species that might threaten native plants and crops, or potentially introduce diseases or harm livestock.

The USDA said Tuesday it is collecting seed packages from recipients to test their contents to "determine if they contain anything that could be of concern." The agency said it has no evidence the packages are something other than a "brushing scam," in which people receive unsolicited items from an online seller who then posts fake customer reviews from a verified buyer to boost sales.

Mike Strain, Louisiana's commissioner of agriculture and forestry, said his department is in the process of retrieving seeds from some of the roughly 300 people who have received unsolicited packages from China and other countries. USDA officials would visit the department in the next few days to examine the seeds it has collected, he said.

Among the seeds Louisiana is retrieving are those sent to Darci Portie, a 40-year old nurse practitioner. Ms. Portie's seeds, delivered Saturday, came in a small parcel bearing a label that suggested there was a single bead inside that had been sent from the United Arab Emirates. The package contained a small plastic bag with roughly 100 brown seeds, the size and color of raisins.

"A million things run through your head," said Ms. Portie, such as how and why the seeds were sent to her. Ms. Portie said her husband is an avid gardener, and has been jokingly cajoling her to let him plant just one seed. "That's not going to happen," she said. The

Washington, D.C., embassy of the United Arab Emirates didn't immediately respond to a request for comment.

China's Foreign Ministry said Tuesday that mailing labels on the seed packages were forged and that the country has asked the U.S. to return the packages to China for investigation.

Mr. Strain of Louisiana said, "What concerns us [is] if someone does not contact us, and plants the seeds or feeds them to their chickens." He said Louisiana already is fighting an invasive insect called the mealy bug that is killing a marsh grass called Roseau cane along the state's coast.

The Office of Indiana State Chemist, located at Purdue University, urged Indiana residents on Tuesday not to plant or even dispose of the seeds, because of the potential harm they could cause to backyard gardens and crops that are key to the agricultural economy.

"It might be tempting to put this into some soil to see what happens, but there's a lot of damage that can cause," said Don Robison, seed administrator for the Office of Indiana State Chemist. "The last thing we want is to spread a weed, invasive species or disease, and that's a real risk if people plant these or throw them in the garbage."

Brittany Ensign, a first-time gardener in upstate New York, has carefully sealed the stuffed bag of seeds she received in the mail on Monday. The seeds, light brown and reminiscent of bird seed, came in a package suggesting it was from China that possibly contained either a wire connector or 1,500 pieces of jewelry.

"I'm a little confused, and I'm curious," she said.

Michael Wallace, a spokesman for the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer services, said several people the department has heard from have planted seeds they received. Since last week, Virginia officials have been inundated by more than 1,000 calls and emails from seed recipients, Mr. Wallace said.

"This is much bigger than what we initially thought," he said.

[China] U.S. Warns Against Planting Mystery Seeds From China (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [7/28/2020 9:28 PM, Anna Kitanaka, 6400K, Neutral]

U.S. federal agencies are investigating suspicious and unsolicited packages of seeds that have been arriving at addresses across America and appear to come from China.

Anyone who receives the packages should hold onto the seeds and packaging and immediately contact officials, the U.S. Department of Agriculture said in a statement.

The USDA doesn't have any evidence to indicate this is something other than a "brushing scam," where a seller sends unsolicited packages so they can post false customer reviews online and boost sales, it said.

The department is collecting the seed packages and will test their contents for anything that

could be of concern to U.S. agriculture or the environment, it said.

China's foreign ministry on Tuesday said that China Post has strictly followed regulations that ban the sending and receiving of seeds. China Post has talked to its U.S. counterparts about returning parcels to the Asian nation so it can investigate further, Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said.

[China] USDA issues warning about mysterious packages of seeds (ABC News)

ABC News [7/28/2020 7:46 PM, Staff, 29K, Neutral]

Mystery seed packages are being sent to Americans from China. States are issuing warnings not to open the seeds as they could be invasive or carry disease or pests.

[Editorial note: consult video at source link]

[Hong Kong] FedEx pilots, union call on company to suspend Hong Kong operations (Reuters)

Reuters [7/28/2020 9:14 PM, Akanksha Rana, Lisa Baertlein, 5304K, Negative]

The union representing FedEx Corp pilots on Tuesday called on the U.S. package delivery company to suspend its operations in Hong Kong after some of its members were subject to "extremely difficult conditions" in government-mandated quarantine aimed at tamping down the spread of the coronavirus.

The Air Line Pilots Association International (ALPA) said three FedEx pilots infected with the coronavirus were forced into mandated hospital facilities for up to 10 days in Hong Kong. Those pilots were asymptomatic.

Several other pilots who tested negative, but had been in contact with individuals who tested positive, were put in government camps "under extremely difficult conditions," the world's largest pilots' union said.

"Not only do these situations pose unacceptable risks to our pilots' safety and wellbeing, but they also create added stress and distraction for flight operations," said Dave Chase, chairman, FedEx ALPA Master Executive Council.

FedEx in a statement said the company was fully engaged with government authorities to support its crew members in situations that required medical treatment or self-isolation in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong reported 106 new COVID-19 cases on Tuesday, including 98 that were locally transmitted.

The global financial hub, which recently tightened social distancing measures, also braced for the implementation of strict new measures that will ban restaurant dining and restrict gatherings to two people.

[Hong Kong] China says Hong Kong to suspend crime-related agreements with UK, Canada, Australia (Reuters)

Reuters [7/28/2020 9:34 AM, Gabriel Crossley, Se Young Lee, 11261K, Neutral]

China's foreign ministry said on Tuesday that Hong Kong's government would suspend

agreements on mutual assistance for criminal matters, including extradition, with Britain, Canada and Australia.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin told a daily briefing that the three countries' decision to suspend extradition agreements with Hong Kong over a new security law for the city constituted a gross interference in China's internal affairs.

[Hong Kong] Hong Kong warns city on verge of large coronavirus outbreak (Reuters)
Reuters [7/28/2020 8:47 PM, Twinnie Siu and Anne Marie Roantree, 5304K, Negative]
Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam has warned the city is on the brink of a large-scale outbreak of the coronavirus and urged people to stay indoors as much as possible as strict new measures to curb the disease's spread take effect on Wednesday.

The new regulations ban gatherings of more than two people, close dining in restaurants and make the wearing of face masks mandatory in public places, including outdoors. These are the toughest measures introduced in the city since the outbreak.

The government has also tightened testing and quarantine arrangements for sea and air crew members, effective on Wednesday.

"We are on the verge of a large-scale community outbreak, which may lead to a collapse of our hospital system and cost lives, especially of the elderly," Lam said in a statement late on Tuesday.

"In order to protect our loved ones, our healthcare staff and Hong Kong, I appeal to you to follow strictly the social distancing measures and stay at home as far as possible."

The new measures, which will be in place for at least seven days, were announced on Monday after the global financial hub saw a spike in locally transmitted cases over the past three weeks.

On Tuesday, Hong Kong reported 106 new coronavirus cases, including 98 that were locally transmitted. Since late January, more than 2,880 people have been infected in the former British colony, 23 of whom have died.

[Hong Kong] U.S., U.K. Voice New Concern as Hong Kong Considers Election Delay (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [7/28/2020 10:58 PM, Iain Marlow, 6400K, Neutral]

The U.S and key allies Australia and the U.K. voiced new concern about Hong Kong's upcoming elections, amid a flurry of local media reports that the government was considering postponing the vote for as long as a year.

The U.S. and Australia reiterated "deep concern" over the national security legislation China recently imposed on Hong Kong in a statement, saying they hoped the city can choose a new legislature on Sept. 6 "via a genuinely free and fair election, which is credible and peaceful." Separately, U.K. Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab told top Chinese diplomat Wang Yi that Britain "would be watching the Hong Kong Legislative Council elections in September closely."

The statements come after media reports Tuesday that Hong Kong authorities were considering a delay to the Legislative Council election due to a sudden surge in Covid-19 cases. China has repeatedly denounced such comments by the U.S. and its allies as an inappropriate interference in its internal affairs.

On Tuesday, China announced that it would stop Hong Kong's extradition cooperation with Australia, Canada and the U.K. -- a mostly symbolic move as the three had already suspended the agreements. New Zealand had earlier joined the allies in suspending its extradition pact with the city.

The Hong Kong government was considering asking China's parliament to extend current lawmakers' terms for a year to allow for an election, news organizations including HK01 reported late Tuesday, citing people it didn't identify. While Chief Executive Carrie Lam has power to postpone the election due to riots, extreme weather or public health emergencies, city guidelines say that the election must be held within 14 days -- and can't be delayed more than once.

A Hong Kong government spokesperson said Tuesday that the Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau and the Registration and Electoral Office were preparing for the election and were communication with health authorities to formulate plans. The city government didn't immediately respond Wednesday to additional questions about the HK01 report.

Asking the National People's Congress to extend lawmakers' terms would be unprecedented and raise new questions about the limits of Beijing's willingness to intervene in local politics in the former British colony.

Suggestions of an election delay have prompted criticism from Hong Kong democracy advocates, who had been hoping to ride the momentum of an unprecedented landslide victory in local elections late last year to an historic majority in the legislature.

The opposition's concerns over delays and disqualifications have grown after at least a dozen hopeful candidates were queried in letters from electoral officials about their past political statements and actions. The inquiries highlighted the candidates' communications with foreign governments and officials, lobbying targeted by the security law Beijing imposed on the city in late June.

Meanwhile, prominent protest organizer Benny Tai was fired Tuesday from his associate professor position at the University of Hong Kong over his conviction stemming from the 2014 Occupy demonstrations. The move followed his being singled out by Beijing's top agency in the city for seeking a "color revolution" in Hong Kong by holding an opposition primary earlier this month.

After Tai's ouster, China's Liaison Office in Hong Kong issued statement praising the move as a "righteous act that aligns with the wishes of the people."

Pro-establishment figures have been floating an election delay since at least March 31, when lawmaker Junius Ho urged a postponement due to the virus. Ho renewed his call in a July 16 Facebook post, citing a need to "restore order" following widespread protests, as

well as the sudden surge in infections. Other Beijing loyalists including Tam Yiu-chung, the city's only representative on the NPC's top body, have since voiced support for a delay.

A delay would not be unprecedented globally. At least 68 countries and territories postponed national and subnational elections because of the virus between Feb. 21 and July 26, including in Ethiopia and Bolivia, according to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, an intergovernmental organization made up of various democratic states.

Around 49 countries and territories went ahead with votes as originally planned, the group said, which included local elections in Queensland, Australia, and by-elections in Bangladesh.

[Hong Kong] Benny Tai: Hong Kong university fires professor who led protests (Yahoo News/BBC)

Yahoo News/BBC [7/28/2020 12:30 PM, Staff, 11261K, Neutral]

A leading Hong Kong university has fired its law professor, Benny Tai, due to a criminal conviction over his role in the 2014 pro-democracy protests.

Mr Tai, 56, accused the University of Hong Kong (HKU) of bowing to pressure from Beijing and said the ruling was "the end of academic freedom".

Mr Tai was one of the founders of the "umbrella protests" that paralysed Hong Kong's business districts for weeks.

Last year, a court sentenced him to 16 months in prison for his role.

He was granted bail in August, pending an appeal.

The 2014 protests, which were largely peaceful, lasted for more than 70 days as people took to the streets to call for democracy.

The university governing council's decision to dismiss Mr Tai goes against a previous ruling by its senate, which said while Mr Tai had committed misconduct, there were insufficient grounds to dismiss him.

According to local media, 18 members of the university's committee voted for his removal, with two against.

If he wishes to appeal the decision, he would have to either go through the university's chancellor - Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam - or a judicial review, the South China Morning Post reports.

Writing in a Facebook post, Mr Tai said: "Academic staff in education institutions in Hong Kong are no longer free to make controversial statements to the general public about politically or socially controversial matters."

The decision to fire him was "made not by the University of Hong Kong but by an authority

beyond the University through its agents," he said, adding "I am heartbroken to witness the demise of my beloved university."

The university said in a statement that it had "resolved a personnel issue concerning a teaching staff member" after a "stringent and impartial due process".

Meanwhile, the Hong Kong-Beijing Liaison Office, which represents Beijing's government in Hong Kong, welcomed his removal, saying: "The University of Hong Kong's decision to fire Benny Tai is a move that punishes evil and praises the virtuous."

Chinese state media has accused him of colluding with foreign forces and described him as a "hardcore troublemaker".

The university's ruling comes weeks after a controversial security law was passed in the city, giving China more powers there.

The law criminalises secession, subversion and collusion with foreign forces, but critics say that the terms are vaguely defined and the law effectively curtails Hong Kong's freedoms.

It also comes amid local media reports that elections to Hong Kong's parliament - the Legislative Council - could be postponed by a year. News outlets HK01, Hong Kong Economic Times and TVB said the government had made the decision, which is yet to be formally announced, due to coronavirus concerns.

Mr Tai has been accused by the Hong Kong-Beijing Liaison Office of trying to launch a revolution. He had helped organise opposition primaries earlier this month, which attracted hundreds of thousands of voters.

[Indonesia] Indonesia launches \$7 bln loan guarantee scheme for "priority" companies (Reuters)

Reuters [7/29/2020 12:13 AM, Tabita Diela, 5304K, Neutral]

Indonesia has launched a 100 trillion rupiah (\$6.92 billion) loan guarantee scheme targeting businesses in priority sectors as part of efforts to help companies stay afloat during the coronavirus pandemic, the finance minister said.

The programme will offer guarantee for working capital loans of between 10 billion rupiah to 1 trillion rupiah for a period of up to a year to help businesses with their cashflow.

"We hope the risk appetite from banks as well as companies can be restored and thus result in optimism to conduct activities," Finance Minister Sri Mulyani Indrawati told a streamed press conference on Wednesday, noting banks had been cautious giving out loans despite having ample liquidity.

The government is offering a guarantee for up to 80% of loans for companies in priority sectors such as tourism, automotive, textile and garment, and electronics.

The loan guarantee scheme is an expansion of a previously announced initiative to help small businesses recover from the impact of the pandemic.

Businesses eligible for the latest programme are those affected by the pandemic employing at least 300 people and seen as having potential to support the country's economic growth.

Businesses in the priority sectors needed as much as 303.76 trillion in working capital over the next six months to meet operational costs after cash flows had dried up due to social restrictions to curb the virus, Rosan Roeslani, chairman of Indonesia's chamber of commerce and industry (Kadin), said on Tuesday.

Southeast Asia's largest economy has been trying to boost loan disbursement by channelling liquidity to state-owned banks and regional banks.

The financial regulator has also relaxed restructuring rules to help banks manage their capital.

Indonesia's loan growth in May expanded just 3.04% on-year, the weakest pace since at least December, 2002, as the pandemic took its toll on the economy.

[Japan] Navy P-8 Plane Makes Emergency Landing in Japan Following Compressor Stall (Yahoo News/Military.com)

Yahoo News/Military.com [7/28/2020 8:30 AM, Oriana Pawlyk, 11261K, Neutral]

A compressor stall forced the Navy crew of a P-8 Poseidon maritime surveillance aircraft to request an emergency landing at an Air Force base in the Pacific earlier this month, according to a recent Naval Safety Center accident report.

The crew made a precautionary landing at Kadena Air Base, Japan, July 16, Navy spokesman Lt. Samuel Boyle said Monday. The news was first reported by Navy Times.

"There were no injuries and the landing was safe," Boyle said in a statement. The incident is under investigation, he said.

The Safety Center labeled the event as a Class A mishap, a category that includes fatalities, severe damage totaling \$2 million or more or a complete loss of the aircraft.

The main mission of the P-8A, which replaced the Navy's P-3C Orion, is to track submarines by dropping buoys that ping, listen and detect.

The intelligence-gathering aircraft is a Boeing-made adaptation of its 737 commercial aircraft.

[Japan] Japan Dodged Surge in Total Fatalities During Peak Virus Month (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [7/28/2020 10:00 PM, Gearoid Reidy, 6400K, Negative]

Japan avoided a surge in overall fatalities during its deadliest month of the coronavirus pandemic, indicating the country has been successful in limiting the damage from Covid-19.

Mortality across the nation dropped by 3.5% in May from a year earlier, with Japan recording a total of 108,380 deaths from any cause, data released Tuesday by the nation's Health Ministry show. The month, during which much of the country was under a state of

emergency, saw the most deaths so far from Covid-19. Japan officially recorded 468 coronavirus-related fatalities in May, almost half its total to date of 1,001.

Japan's virus approach, choosing to avoid mass-testing in the early phases of the outbreak, has raised questions about whether the impact of the epidemic may have been worse than reported. But the data suggest the country, which has the fewest reported deaths of any Group of Seven country, isn't overlooking fatalities from the pandemic to a large degree.

The results come as Japan is struggling to cope with a new surge of coronavirus cases across the country, while also resisting pressure to put restrictions on businesses that could further damage an economy that has already been pushed into recession. While Hong Kong and parts of Australia have reimposed tighter measures after cases surged in those regions, Japan has demurred.

World Health Organization Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has hailed Japan as a "good example" of countries that have kept fatality levels low.

"I think Japan is a success story," Tedros said Monday. "If you take the death rate in Japan, even when the number of cases increase, they managed to keep the number of deaths at a minimum."

Japan was under a state of emergency for much of May, only lifted nationwide on May 25. That may have helped contribute to the overall drop in deaths, with suicides and fatal road accidents falling as people stayed at home. The drop in mortality was particularly notable in Tokyo, which had 7% fewer deaths in May than an average year.

Concern over the virus situation in Japan is growing as cases have surged in recent weeks. An outbreak initially thought confined to nighttime entertainment areas in Tokyo has spread to workplaces and across the country. Many population centers have recorded their highest daily cases in the past few days, while Japan overall had almost 1,000 new cases on Tuesday, a record.

The government has attempted to shift attention from the raw case numbers to the amount of serious infections, which remain low as many of those are primarily among younger people. However, fatality levels could increase as cases begin to spread to older communities.

[Japan] Japan's air force faces a 'relentless' burden, imposed by China (CNN)

CNN [7/28/2020 10:18 PM, Brad Lendon and Yoko Wakatsuki, 7975K, Neutral]

Japanese fighter pilot Lt. Col. Takamichi Shirota says his country is under increasing pressure from the air. Analysts say it's a pressure faced by few other nations.

More than twice a day, Japanese fighter pilots hear a siren blare, bolt up from their ready-room seats, run to their jets, and scream aloft, ready to intercept a potentially unidentified incursion into Japanese airspace.

It happened to Japan's Air Self Defense Force (JASDF) 947 times in the last fiscal year ending in March. The culprit in most of those cases, warplanes from China's People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF).

And Shirota says the number of potential incursions is growing.

"The number of scrambles against airspace violations has been increasing rapidly over the past decade -- especially in the southwest air zone," said Shirota in an exclusive interview with CNN. "About 70% of the scrambles done by Japan's SDF annually are conducted in this area."

That southwest area includes the Senkaku Islands -- known as the Diaoyu Islands in China -- a rocky, uninhabited group of islands under Japanese administration but claimed by China as its territory.

It also includes Okinawa, home to the United States Air Force's Kadena Air Base, which touts itself as the "Keystone of the Pacific" and is a key US installation for flights over the contested waters of the South China Sea.

Japan's Defense Ministry in March released a map showing the flight routes of Chinese and Russian aircraft that Japan's fighter pilots rose to intercept. The Chinese flight routes are shown in red. Their density makes the East China Sea, the part of the Pacific Ocean between China and Japan's southern islands, look like a sea of red.

The Chinese flights don't violate international law. Of the 675 times Japan's fighters scrambled after Chinese planes in the last fiscal year, not once did the Chinese aircraft fly within the internationally recognized 12-mile territorial limit, according to the Japanese Defense Ministry.

And even then, China says the presence of its forces within the Senkakus/Diaoyu island chain is within its sovereign rights.

"Diaoyu island and the affiliated islands are China's inherent territory, China is resolute in safeguarding our territorial sovereignty," Zhao Lijian, a spokesperson for China's Foreign Ministry, said in June.

The Chinese Foreign and Defense ministries did not respond to CNN requests for comment on this specific Japanese report.

Still, Japan says Chinese planes often intrude into its Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ), which can vary in size depending upon location.

The US Federal Aviation Administration defines an ADIZ as "a designated area of airspace over land or water within which a country requires the immediate and positive identification, location, and air traffic control of aircraft in the interest of the country's national security."

Shirota, the 40-year-old commander of the JASDF 204th Tactical Fighter Squadron at Naha Air Base on Okinawa, has his pilots on alert 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, to do just that.

"The Air Self Defense Force is the one and only entity able to protect Japan's territory and airspace," he says.

And though there have been no shooting incidents with the Chinese planes, it's always a tense job, Shirota says.

"We wait on guard on the ground all the time in tension," the Japanese pilot says. "The same said while we are in the sky. We keep the motivation high all the time.

"Because we never know what we will face once we go up in the sky. We might see them (Chinese aircraft) leaving, or we might face off," he says.

The readiness of the Japanese pilots is remarkable when you consider their burden. No Western air force comes close to Japan in the number of times their fighter jets scramble against potentially hostile aircraft.

The air forces of the 27 European members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) combined flew fewer than half the intercepts last year than Japan did.

"I can tell you that over the 12 months period of 2019, NATO jets took to the skies approximately 430 times to intercept or visually identify unidentified aircraft that flew either in, close to, or towards NATO airspace," Lt. Col. Michael Wawrzyniak, chief public affairs officer for Allied Air Command in Germany, told CNN.

Across the Atlantic, US and Canadian fighters under command of NORAD, the North American Aerospace Defense Command, has averaged just seven intercepts a year of Russian aircraft since 2007, said Capt. Cameron Hillier, a spokesperson for NORAD and the US Northern Command in Colorado. Some years, US and Canadian fighter jets haven't had to scramble at all.

Japan has seen no such respite. Using the same 2007 time frame as NORAD, even in its slowest year, 2009, Japan scrambled its fighter jets more than 200 times.

Analyst Peter Layton, a former Royal Australian Air Force pilot now with the Griffith Asia Institute, believes the pressure China puts on Japan by air is part of a larger plan.

"I think China wants to keep the JASDF off-balance and reactive, wear out its aircraft and air crew, gain training and keep the pressure up daily on who owns the disputed islands," Layton told CNN.

In a commentary last year written for The Interpreter blog from Australia's Lowy Institute, Layton detailed just how far the Chinese flights stretch the JASDF, and how China has the resources to push Japan to limits it may not be able to reach.

"The JASDF's fleet of some 215 F-15J aircraft bears the brunt of scramble tasking," he wrote.

"Since 2016, the JASDF have often launched four aircraft for each scramble.

"These daily scrambles are gradually wearing the F-15J fleet out. The concern is that China has some six times more fighters than the JASDF, and could further ramp up intrusions whenever it considers appropriate. The in-service life of Japan's F-15J fleet is now almost a decision that lies with China," Layton said.

Layton told CNN that Tokyo cannot back down, however.

"The Japanese believe they need to respond every time as to do otherwise might be interpreted as being less committed to territorial ownership," he said.

And Japan is stepping up its responses to possible Chinese threats.

A Defense Ministry official said Japanese fighters are now scrambling as soon as Chinese planes take off from their mainland bases in range of the Senkakus. They had previously waited until Chinese planes headed toward Japanese airspace.

In its 2020 Defense White Paper published this month, Tokyo noted Beijing's pressure around the Senkakus.

"China has relentlessly continued unilateral attempts to change the status quo by coercion in the sea area around the Senkaku Islands, leading to a grave matter of concern," it said.

"The Chinese Navy and Air Force have in recent years expanded and intensified their activities in the surrounding sea areas and airspace of Japan, and there are cases involving the one-sided escalation of activities," the White Paper said.

The document notes what Japan is doing to meet the challenge, with new fighter jets, like the stealth F-3, in the planning stages. Japan has also begun receiving US-designed F-35 stealth fighters, considered as good as, or better than anything China can put up at the moment.

But the F-3 is years away from the assembly line and the F-35s won't come in the kind of numbers that can put much of a dent in China's advantage there.

So the burden will fall to Shirota and his fellow aviators.

"Japan is surrounded by the sea. So the invasion comes from either the ocean or the sky. If the invasion comes from the air, it will happen all very fast," he says.

"Securing the air defense is directly linked to protect Japan, the lives and assets of the Japanese people," Shirota says. "I am full-heartedly serving my duty as an Air Self Defense Force officer with strong will to protect Japan."

[Malaysia] Malaysia Police Say There's 'Strong Indication' Jho Low in Macau (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [7/29/2020 12:22 AM, Anisah Shukry, 6400K, Neutral]

Malaysia's police suspect that Low Taek Jho is hiding in Macau, amid efforts to bring the fugitive financier home to face justice for his role in the troubled state fund 1MDB.

"Strong indication that he is there -- full stop," Inspector-General of Police Abdul Hamid Bador said in a text message to Bloomberg. The police chief in February had said they received intelligence that Low was active in Wuhan.

Malaysia's court Tuesday said that Low had played a crucial role in transferring 42 million ringgit (\$10 million) of funds from a former 1MDB unit to ex-prime minister Najib Razak's accounts. Najib was found guilty of all seven charges in the trial and faces 12 years in prison, along with a 210 million ringgit fine.

[New Zealand] New Zealand Plans to Recover Quarantine Costs From Some Citizens (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [7/28/2020 10:11 PM, Tracy Withers, 6400K, Neutral]

New Zealand is proposing to charge a small proportion of the people entering the country for some of the costs of their quarantine.

The government expects to pass legislation within the next few days to allow the cost recovery to proceed, Housing Minister Megan Woods said Wednesday in Wellington. She expects regulations to be in place to allow the charges within two or three weeks.

Citizens who return home for less than 90 days will incur the charges, as will those who travel overseas for vacations or business and need to quarantine on return. There will be an exemptions framework in place to allow for waivers on compassionate or economic grounds, Woods said. The cost will be NZ\$3,100 (\$2,060) per adult in a room with further charges for extra adults and children.

New Zealand's border is closed to all foreigners, while citizens and permanent residents entering the country must undertake a 14-day mandatory quarantine. So far more than 32,000 people have passed through the system, which will cost the government about NZ\$480 million this year. The intention to recover some of those costs has come under fire because it could impede the ability of citizens to enter their own country.

"We are carefully balancing the rights of New Zealand citizens and residents to return home and the charges structure will be designed to maintain this right," Woods said.

The proposal is expected to impact about 3,000 travelers and generate less than NZ\$10 million of revenue, she said.

[New Zealand] Slave dealer in New Zealand sentenced to 11 years in jail (CNN)

CNN [7/28/2020 9:45 PM, Julia Hollingsworth, 7975K, Negative]

They thought they were going to New Zealand to make better lives for their families.

They were told they would leave Samoa -- a small island nation in the South Pacific -- for their larger neighbor, a country with about 25 times the population. Once there, they would work and send the money back home to their loved ones.

Instead, when they arrived in New Zealand, the 13 victims -- who cannot be named due to a court suppression order -- were confronted with an entirely different situation, legal records show.

Their passports were taken from them. They were kept on a property surrounded by a high wire fence and could only leave or communicate with their family with permission. If they broke the rules, they were assaulted, sometimes so badly that it resulted in scars. When

one teenage victim escaped, she was brought back in a car with her hands and wrists tied, Radio New Zealand reported.

Most worked long hours picking fruits from orchards, but they didn't receive the money they had earned. Instead, it was given to the man who had either directly or indirectly lured them to New Zealand: a Samoan chief named Joseph Auga Matamata.

On Monday, Matamata was sentenced to 11 years in jail for 10 counts of human trafficking and 13 counts of dealing in slaves -- the first case in New Zealand where a person has been convicted of both human trafficking and slavery at the same time.

He was also ordered to pay 183,000 New Zealand dollars (\$122,000) in reparations to his 13 victims to partly compensate them for the estimated 300,000 New Zealand dollars (\$200,000) his family gained from his criminal acts. Matamata has maintained his innocence.

But while Matamata's sentence brings to a close more than two decades of offending, experts say that his case is just the tip of the iceberg.

They say that although human trafficking and slavery convictions are rare in New Zealand, cases are more widespread than those convictions suggest. And they warn that more people could become vulnerable to trafficking in the post-pandemic world.

As a matai -- or chief -- Matamata had a position of authority. In Samoan culture, the matai - the person who holds the family chief title -- commands significant respect.

But, according to sentencing judge Justice Helen Cull, Matamata abused that trust.

Starting in 1994, Matamata began inviting family members or people from his village in Samoa to come to New Zealand to work and live at his property in Hastings, a city on New Zealand's North Island where there are a number of orchards and wineries. All were poorly educated, most could not speak English and some could not read.

The first victims were a brother and sister aged 17 and 15 at the time. The brother expected to earn money to send home to his family, while his sister expected to finish her education in New Zealand.

Instead, the brother worked long days on orchards while the sister cooked, cleaned and helped with childcare -- and neither were paid for their work. Matamata restricted their movements and physically abused them.

The other 11 victims -- who were aged between 12 and 53 at the time they came to New Zealand -- had similar experiences, according to the judgment.

In many of the cases, Matamata organized three-month visitor visas for the victims, rather than the employment visas they would need to work legally.

The victims were told not to leave the property without permission, and not to communicate with their families in Samoa unless Matamata permitted it. They were not to communicate

with passersby or connect with other people at weekly church services. If they didn't comply, Matamata "assaulted them and created a climate of fear and intimidation," Justice Cull said.

Matamata contracted all -- except for the 15-year-old sister -- out to horticulture operators, but then pocketed the money they earned for himself. One was given as little as 10 New Zealand dollars (\$7) a week. Another received 850 New Zealand dollars (\$565) for more than 17 months' work.

Eventually, many of the victims were deported to Samoa as they had not been on the correct visa.

When they returned home, many felt a sense of shame as they had "nothing to show for their time away and were criminalized for their illegal immigration status," Justice Cull said in her sentencing notes, adding that shame was made worse because of Matamata's chiefly status.

"They cannot return to New Zealand for work and many feel this stigma and history will limit their ability to work ... for the rest of their lives," she said, noting that in many cases, coming to New Zealand had worsened their families' financial situation. "Some of the victims are hopeful for their future but many still feel a lot of guilt and pain for what occurred to them at (Matamata's) hands."

In a statement following the sentencing, Immigration New Zealand general manager of verification and compliance, Stephen Vaughan, said the sentence recognized that Matamata's offending went "against all basic human decency."

"His breaches of trust, physical abuse, and blatant disregard for the well-being of people he was purporting to help were unconscionable and must be condemned," Vaughan said.

For a long time, there's been a perception that human trafficking and slavery don't take place in New Zealand, says Natalia Szablewska, a senior lecturer at Auckland University of Technology law school who is an expert on human trafficking.

Human trafficking was only added to the country's Crimes Act in 2002, and as recently as 2010, the head of immigration said there was no evidence of human trafficking in New Zealand, according to a paper by one of the country's top judges.

But it was only after New Zealand broadened its definition of human trafficking in 2015 to include domestic trafficking, meaning it doesn't need to be cross-border, that the country had its first ever human trafficking conviction. In 2016, a man named Faroz Ali was found guilty of trafficking Fijian workers into the country.

Experts say that the low number of convictions don't capture the whole picture. According to non-profit Walk Free Foundation's Global Slavery Index, which is based on estimates using surveys, there are more than 40 million victims of modern slavery around the world -- and 3,000 victims in New Zealand.

As with all countries, it's hard to gather accurate statistics due to the hidden nature of the

crime.

Matamata's case was only brought to the attention of authorities in 2017, according to Immigration New Zealand, and court documents said most victims were too ashamed to speak about their experiences even after they returned to Samoa.

Detective Inspector Mike Foster said the case -- which required help from Samoan authorities -- was one of the most complex joint investigations between Immigration New Zealand and the police.

But while we don't know the true extent, research shows exploitation is happening.

A report by two academics published in 2019 found that people in New Zealand on student visas or employer-assisted visas were most vulnerable to exploitation. Some interviewees from India said education agents had sold them "a dream" of permanent residency in New Zealand. Some borrowed heavily to get to New Zealand, and became so desperate when they couldn't find legitimate work that they accepted exploitative conditions.

The majority of the 64 migrant workers interviewed as part of the study had been underpaid in at least one of their jobs, with some wages as low as 3 New Zealand dollars (\$2) an hour -- well under New Zealand's minimum wage.

So if there's more cases, why aren't more people coming forward?

One reason, according to Rebekah Armstrong, the director of New Zealand-based Business and Human Rights Consultants, is that victims are often terrified that if they complain, they will lose their visa status -- and potentially their pathway to residency. In New Zealand, immigration and labor issues are handled by the same ministry -- and Armstrong thinks that may be putting some victims off reporting abuse.

In a 2016 report, a migrant worker interviewee was quoted as saying: "I feel like they (the employer) own me because of visas."

With millions around the world losing their jobs as a result of the coronavirus, experts warn that could make more people vulnerable to trafficking -- including in New Zealand.

"Once they are desperate, (people) will go for so-called opportunities where what you are asked to do or the way you are asked to do it is pretty unfair and below labor standards," Szablewska said. "Those who have been vulnerable will become even more vulnerable."

Gary Jones, the manager of trade policy and strategy for industry group New Zealand Apples and Pears, said that the 350,000 migrant workers currently in New Zealand could become vulnerable to exploitation if their work dries up.

The current climate is also worrying the government. On Monday, the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment said the government would invest 50 million New Zealand dollars (\$33.2 million) to reduce the risk of exploitation occurring, which it said was increasing as a result of Covid-19. Those changes include establishing a new visa to help migrants leave exploitative situations and increasing the number of immigration

investigators.

But Szablewska wants New Zealand to follow in the footsteps of other countries like Australia by introducing a Modern Slavery Act that requires businesses to do due diligence on their own supply chain. New Zealand businesses operating in Australia that have a turnover over a certain threshold are also subject to the rules.

Szablewska thinks that a Modern Slavery Act would help raise awareness about the issue in New Zealand -- and perhaps encourage more victims to come forward.

"I don't think most businesses in most cases want to rely on forced labor," she said.

Jones thinks that commercial pressures can be more effective than legal changes.

New Zealand Apples and Pears, for instance, have adopted an international framework where businesses have to prove they are treating workers well in order to get their products in overseas supermarkets. If they don't meet the criteria, their products won't be stocked.

That shift -- along with other changes such as a visa scheme brought in more than a decade ago that gives more protection to Pacific Islanders working in the horticulture industry -- makes it harder for people like Matamata to offend, said Jones. But it could still happen, he said.

"If you want to hide things, you can certainly hide things," he said.

[Philippines] Philippines] Pandemic Strands Hundreds in Stadium (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [7/28/2020 11:57 PM, Staff, 6400K, Negative]

"There is a tendency that we can get sick if we stay longer here." Hundreds of workers from around the Philippines are stranded at a baseball stadium in Manila, awaiting government help to get them home. Most lost their jobs due to Covid-19. [Editorial note: Consult source link for video]

[South Korea] South Korea launches safety probe into Tesla vehicles (Reuters)

Reuters [7/28/2020 10:28 PM, Joyce Lee, Hyunjoo Jin, 5304K, Neutral]

South Korea said it is investigating suspected safety issues with vehicles made by U.S. automaker Tesla Inc (TSLA.O), which is competing strongly with Hyundai Motor Co (005380.KS) in the South Korean electric vehicle market.

Braking and steering systems including the Autopilot function were part of the investigation, a transport ministry official said on Wednesday.

The ministry declined to elaborate but South Korean media said Tesla's Model 3 was under investigation, and the probe might take anywhere from six months to a year.

Tesla would cooperate with the investigation, an official at its South Korean unit said.

The U.S. National Transportation Safety Board last year cited driver errors and Tesla's Autopilot design as the probable cause of a January 2018 crash of a Model S in California.

In Hyundai's home market, Tesla had its best month in June, with its Model 3 beating Hyundai's Kona EV, as well as premium models from BMW and Audi.

[Vietnam] Vietnam reports eight more COVID-19 cases linked to Danang outbreak (Reuters)

Reuters [7/28/2020 10:40 PM, Phuong Nguyen, 5304K, Negative]

Vietnam's health ministry on Wednesday reported eight new locally transmitted coronavirus cases linked to three hospitals in the central city of Danang, taking the outbreak to 30 infections since the virus resurfaced at the weekend.

The Southeast Asian nation is back on high alert after authorities on Saturday confirmed that new cases had appeared in Danang, the country's first community infections since April.

Vietnam has registered a total of 446 coronavirus cases altogether, with no deaths. Nearly 83% of the infected patients have recovered, the health ministry said.

[Vietnam] Vietnam Warns capital to brace for new COVID-19 Outbreak (Reuters)

Reuters [7/29/2020 12:14 AM, Khanh Vu and James Pearson, 28290K, Neutral]

Vietnam, virus-free for months, was bracing for another wave of COVID-19 infections on Wednesday after local media reported a case in the capital, Hanoi, linked to a recent outbreak in the central city of Danang.

Hanoi should prepare medical equipment and materials for another "fight against COVID-19", the Southeast Asian country's government said in a statement, which made no mention of the case reported in media.

Thanks to a centralised quarantine programme and an aggressive contact-tracing system, Vietnam had managed to keep its coronavirus tally to just 446 cases, despite sharing a long and porous border with China.

Vietnam, with over 95 million people, is the most populous country in the world to have recorded no deaths from the virus.

That record is now under threat following an outbreak last weekend in Danang, where tens of thousands of local tourists had been taking advantage of heavily discounted travel deals designed to support the country's virus-hit tourism industry.

The government on Tuesday suspended all flights to and from Danang for 15 days. At least 30 cases of the novel coronavirus have been detected in or around the city.

About 18,000 tourists who had been in Danang have returned to the southern business hub Ho Chi Minh City, authorities said on Tuesday.

The Hanoi authorities had earlier said they were expecting 15,000 to 20,000 to return for Danang.

A staff member at a Hanoi pizza restaurant who recently returned from Danang had tested positive for the coronavirus, state media reported on Wednesday, adding that authorities had closed the restaurant for disinfection.

The health ministry has yet to confirm a new Hanoi case.

Vietnam will repatriate 120 construction workers infected with COVID-19 from Equatorial Guinea on Wednesday, according to state media. The stricken workers will be treated at a hospital outside Hanoi.

South and Central Asia

[India] India's gloomy outlook darkens, recovery path in doubt: Reuters poll (Reuters)
Reuters [7/29/2020 12:21 AM, Manjul Paul and Shaloo Shrivastava, 5304K, Neutral]

The outlook for India's reeling economy has worsened again as business activity slows and COVID-19 infections soar, and will probably prompt the Reserve Bank of India to cut interest rates again soon, a Reuters poll of economists suggests.

The latest findings echo recent criticism of New Delhi's \$266 billion economic rescue package, which does not include new spending, tax breaks or cash support, suggesting more will be needed to turn the economy around.

With India now the third-worst-hit country by number of infections after the United States and Brazil, the risk of renewed lockdowns after a nationwide shutdown in March-May has risen.

The Indian economy is now likely to contract this quarter and next and in this fiscal year as a whole, according to the July 20-28 poll of nearly 60 economists. Growth had been expected for all of those periods except the second quarter in the previous poll, taken in April.

"India's failure to contain the spread of the coronavirus, and the government's underwhelming support package for firms and households, means the economy will suffer its largest drop in output on record this year," said Darren Aw, Asia economist at Capital Economics in Singapore.

In the quarter just gone by, the Indian economy is forecast to have shrunk 20.0% - the first double-digit contraction since official quarterly data started being released in the mid-1990s. It will then contract 6.0% and 0.3% in the current and following quarters, respectively, according to the poll.

That compared to a -5.2% forecast for the last quarter in the April 23 poll, followed by 0.8% and 4.2% growth in the current and next quarters, respectively.

For the current fiscal year, Asia's third-largest economy is forecast to shrink 5.1%, a complete turnaround from the 1.5% growth predicted in the previous poll. It would be the weakest performance since 1979.

Under a worst-case scenario, the economy is forecast to have contracted 30.0% in the April-June quarter, and to shrink 10.0%, 4.0% and 9.1% in the current and next quarters and this fiscal year, respectively.

"The health crisis is yet to be addressed and is spreading geographically, which has led to re-initiation of lockdowns and restrictions in many parts of the country," said Prithviraj Srinivas, chief economist at Axis Capital in Mumbai.

"With the health crisis yet to be contained, we cannot hope for a smooth recovery."

When asked how long would it take for India's gross domestic product to reach pre-COVID-19 levels, a slight majority of economists, 23 of 44, said within two years.

Only seven respondents predicted it would happen within a year, while the remaining 14 said it would take two years or more.

Inflation is expected to average 4.5% this fiscal year, and the RBI is forecast to cut the repo rate by another 25 basis points at its Aug. 4-6 meeting, and once more next quarter, to a record low of 3.50%.

The RBI has already reduced the repo rate by a total of 115 basis points since February, and 135 basis points in an easing cycle last year, from 6.50%, responding to an economy that was already slowing.

In response to an additional question, over three-quarters of 45 economists said the strength of the recovery had worsened or at best stayed the same over the last month.

"The government is the only catalyst at this moment to be able to spur growth and mitigate the COVID-19 crisis," said Hugo Erken, head of international economics at Rabobank.

"Fiscal policy is there to fill in the gap left by an absence of domestic demand from the private sector, which we saw over Q2. Basically the private sector was locked up for two months, but the government hasn't stepped up in any way that could have helped cover this gap."

[Pakistan] Pakistan Warned of Fresh Virus Threat as Millions Travel for Eid (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [7/28/2020 5:00 PM, Faseeh Mangi, Neutral]

Pakistan is at risk for a second wave of virus infections during the upcoming Eid holidays as millions travel to their home towns and mingle at family and religious gatherings.

The South Asian nation – with the second highest number of infections in Asia – has had some respite over the last few weeks with the rate of new infections slowing. But experts warn the chances of a resurgence are high, with Friday marking the start of the religious holiday. And they say it's difficult to assess the path of the nation's epidemic because its testing rate remains one of the lowest in the world.

"Eid al-Fitr will draw millions of people into crowded fairs and religious and family

gatherings," said Steve Hanke, professor of Applied Economics at Johns Hopkins University. "Masks and social distancing will be abandoned, and similar to the Chinese New Year in Wuhan, Eid al-Fitr could become a cataclysmic event for Pakistan and the region."

Pakistan will also have to manage Muharram processions in late August, when large crowds of Shiite Muslims gather to praise and mourn Imam Hussain, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad killed in the battle of Karbala. Globally, religious gatherings have sparked several virus clusters.

Prime Minister Imran Khan's government said last month its estimates showed the pandemic will reach its peak by the end of July with 1.2 million reported cases. As of Tuesday, the country had reported more than 275,000 confirmed cases with 5,900 deaths. The country's cases rose by 3.7% last week, the slowest pace since the outbreak began in Pakistan.

Qatar Airways and Emirates are among the airlines that have made it compulsory for travelers from Pakistan to get tested before travel. Meanwhile, Pakistan has stopped testing incoming travelers – one reason for a drop in testing rates and new confirmed cases.

"The significance of the drop is that cases are likely being highly underreported," said Hanke in an emailed reply.

Khan has downplayed the seriousness of the virus, but his administration has advised caution.

"Any complacency and we will face the same increase we saw earlier," said Faisal Sultan, the prime minister's point person for Covid-19 strategy and an infectious disease expert. The reason for the recent drop in cases "is harder to know but is likely multi-factorial. The biology of the epidemic including interplay of host, pathogen and environment but also interventions have likely helped."

The pressure on Pakistan's hospitals has also eased with patients on ventilators and low flow oxygen dropping by more than 50% since June 20, Faisal said.

Pakistan's largest pharmaceutical manufacturer Getz Pharma tested 24,210 people in mostly urban workspaces. Its study then extrapolated those findings to the urban, adult, working population of Pakistan and found active COVID-19 infections would likely reach 4.11 million, which is almost 15 times higher than the current tally. The positivity rate for those tested in the study was 17.5%, higher than government data that shows the rate dropping to below 5% from more than 20% in June.

Pakistan's medical associations and experts have long warned that low testing and lack of data means there is an underbelly of virus cases that don't appear in official figures.

Serology tests, private hospital data and many virus-related deaths are not being reported in the government's official numbers, said epidemiologist Wajiha Javed, head of public health and research at Getz Pharma. "The initial peak was two weeks post Eid and we may expect second peak at two weeks post the second Eid."

Western Hemisphere Affairs

[Bolivia] Bolivian worker union marches against election delay as tensions mount (Reuters)

Reuters [7/28/2020 6:10 PM, Daniel Ramos, Adam Jourdan, 5304K, Neutral]

A major Bolivian union led a protest march in the highland city of El Alto on Tuesday, opposing a delay to the country's presidential election as tensions mount over the vote that will decide the country's political future.

Thousands of people joined the march organized by the powerful Bolivian Workers' Center (COB), an umbrella group representing various industries. They carried banners criticizing the conservative interim government, which read "We demand elections" after the ballot was pushed to Oct. 18 due to the coronavirus.

The vote, a re-run of a fraught election last year that sparked violent protests leading to the downfall of long-term leftist leader Evo Morales, is a tussle between the country's socialist party and a fragmented conservative flank.

Morales, exerting his political influence from exile in Argentina, has called for the election to be held on Sept. 6 as previously planned. The electoral tribunal postponed the date because coronavirus infections are expected to peak in coming months.

"The problem in the country is not coronavirus, the problem is this incapable government that has not paid attention [to the pandemic] in a timely manner," said COB union head Juan Carlos Huarachi.

The march ended in a council of workers declaring an indefinite general strike and mobilizations all around the country.

The COB said the interim government of led by presidential candidate Jeanine Añez had used the pandemic to extend power and persecute supporters of Morales' Movement for Socialism (MAS).

"If we join together as miners, peasants, the middle class and El Alto, we can be explosive," said Huarachi.

Yerko Núñez, the minister of the presidency, responded to the demonstrations by accusing MAS presidential candidate, Luis Arce, and union leaders of committing "crimes" against public health by promoting the mobilizations.

"Let it be clear, the leaders of MAS, the coca growers of Chapare, the Bolivian Workers' Center and all those who called for this mobilization will be solely responsible for infections that occur and the collapse of the health system," he said.

Bolivia has recorded over 70,000 confirmed COVID-19 cases, with over 2,600 deaths.

[Brazil] Brazil registers 40,816 confirmed cases of new coronavirus, 921 deaths (Reuters)

Reuters [7/28/2020 6:18 PM, Pedro Fonseca, Jake Spring, 5304K, Negative]

Brazil recorded 40,816 additional confirmed cases of the novel coronavirus in the past 24 hours, as well as 921 deaths from the disease, the Health Ministry said on Tuesday.

Brazil has registered nearly 2.5 million cases of the virus since the pandemic began, while the official death toll has risen to 88,539, according to ministry data.

[Brazil] Brazil virus payout cuts extreme poverty to least in decades (AP)

AP [7/28/2020 6:59 PM, Ricardo Coletta, 2164K, Neutral]

Brazil's extreme poverty has plunged due to a monthly federal handout during the coronavirus pandemic, but threatens to bounce back once the government ceases the stopgap welfare program, a report said Tuesday.

The study by the Getulio Vargas Foundation, a university and think tank, said the number of Brazilians living in extreme poverty fell to 6.9 million in June, or 3.3% of Brazil's population — the lowest level since the late 1970s. As this year began, 6.2% Brazilians were in extreme poverty, the study said.

"Although we can't directly compare the figures because of recent methodological changes on the government's database, we can say it's one of the lowest proportions ever recorded," Daniel Duque, the study's author, said by phone from Rio de Janeiro. He used the World Bank standard that classifies anyone earning less than \$1.90 a day to be in extreme poverty.

The federal government since April has doled out \$115 monthly to informal-sector workers and micro businesses affected by the pandemic, with single mothers receiving double. Duque and other experts say that helped alleviate poverty in a nation riven by inequality, with average monthly income last year at \$280, according to the statistics institute.

The experts warned, however, that the relief is temporary and the number of impoverished Brazilians will rise after the last payment, currently slated for August.

"No question we are in a transitory situation. We won't have this volume of income transfer forever," Duque said. "I think it is very likely we will return to previous poverty levels. I fear we can go back to even worse levels if the labor market doesn't recover."

The payments have already cost the government more than \$32 billion and President Jair Bolsonaro's economy minister, Paulo Guedes, has said its coffers can ill afford to maintain the program much longer. Loose fiscal policy and rising government debt as a percentage of GDP prompted a slew of credit rating downgrades in recent years, and Guedes assumed his position with pledges to slash spending and shore up government accounts.

"We can't continue for long. It's 50 billion reais per month (around \$10 billion). It's not money we have to spare. We are increasing our debt with it," Bolsonaro said early in July.

The benefit was initially planned to last until June, but the president extended it by two months.

Bolsonaro's political allies have started pressuring for another extension, arguing the payments help prevent further loss of support stemming from the president's handling of the COVID-19 crisis. Latin America's largest nation has confirmed more than 2.4 million infections and 88,000 dead — the second highest totals in the world.

Bolsonaro has consistently downplayed the virus' severity, arguing that the impact of restrictions on economic activity will prove far more damaging. Economists surveyed by Brazil's central bank expect the economy to shrink 5.8% this year.

"Without controlling the epidemic there is no economic recovery," Marcelo Medeiros, a visiting professor at Princeton University's Brazil LAB who specializes in inequality, said by phone from New Jersey. "Brazil hasn't controlled the disease, so now the recovery will take much longer and the damage will be greater."

While the rollout of the social program was marred by widespread difficulties for beneficiaries in accessing the funds, today the payout directly or indirectly reaches half of Brazil's population of 210 million, according to the citizenship ministry, which is doling out the amounts.

Rogério Barbosa, an economic inequality researcher at the University of Sao Paulo, said the coronavirus crisis is still punishing the poor who may soon find themselves unassisted.

"When the benefit is over, there will be no work for them," Barbosa said in a phone interview.

Official data say nearly 8 million people lost their jobs during the pandemic's first three months, and the statistics institute hasn't yet published employment data for June.

The economy minister has said he intends to launch a new social program to substitute for the temporary benefit, but the plan and the amount of money it would entail have yet to be detailed.

[Colombia] Colombia coronavirus quarantine to be extended until Aug 30 (Reuters)

Reuters [7/28/2020 8:28 PM, Oliver Griffin and Nelson Bocanegra, 11261K, Negative]

Colombia's national lockdown to curb infections of the new coronavirus will be extended by one month until the end of August, President Ivan Duque said on Tuesday.

The Andean country has reported more than 267,300 coronavirus cases and 9,074 deaths.

"Obligatory preventative isolation, as the general concept, will continue until August 30," Duque said in his nightly broadcast.

This is the eighth time the lockdown has been extended. Duque declared a national lockdown in late March to slow the spread of coronavirus across the Andean country.

Municipalities with little or no coronavirus infections will continue reopening, Duque said, while avoiding gatherings of large groups. Areas with high infection rates have maintained more stringent quarantines.

"We all understand that during these four weeks we have to continue making a great effort to protect ourselves," Duque said.

Capital city Bogota imposed two-week quarantines on certain neighborhoods with one person per household allowed to shop within the neighborhood for essentials each day. The first two-week period has ended and the measure is being applied to different neighborhoods.

Latin America's fourth-largest economy has been battered by the measures taken to slow the spread of coronavirus and a slump in oil prices.

The government expects the economy to contract by 5.5% this year. The country has suspended its fiscal deficit limits for 2020 and 2021 and issued billions in bonds as unemployment rises and businesses close during the quarantine.

[Ecuador] Hundreds wait hours for coronavirus care in Ecuador capital (AP)

AP [7/28/2020 8:24 PM, Staff, 2164K, Neutral]

Hundreds of people with breathing problems waited for hours in long lines in Ecuador's capital Tuesday seeking medical attention and tests to determine if they were infected with the new coronavirus.

Hospitals and funeral homes have been overwhelmed for weeks in Quito, where city officials have reported 12,747 confirmed cases and 605 deaths so far in the pandemic.

The result is that long lines of people observing social distancing snake from hospitals, with waits of up to four hours before they can undergo clinical examinations and a quick coronavirus test.

Health Minister Juan Carlos Zevallos said Quito is "in a critical situation."

"There is a very big demand for hospital beds and beds that have been adapted to care for critical patients who require ventilation and intensive care beds," he said. "We are in a position that doesn't compare in any way to what is happening in the rest of Latin America."

Infections have escalated since authorities decided to loosen social isolation measures at the beginning of June and eased up even more earlier this month.

For Ecuador as a whole, 82,279 confirmed cases have been reported since the end of February, when the first COVID-19 case was detected. COVID-19 has killed 5,584 people, by the official tally, though experts say 3,353 more deaths probably were caused by the virus.

[Ecuador] Ecuador on alert over huge Chinese fishing fleet off Galapagos Islands (Yahoo News/BBC)

Yahoo News/BBC [7/28/2020 8:52 PM, Staff, 11261K, Negative]

Ecuador is on alert due to the appearance of a huge fleet of mostly Chinese-flagged fishing vessels off its Galapagos Islands.

Patrols are trying to ensure the fleet - which is made up of around 260 vessels - does not enter the delicate eco-system from international waters.

Chinese vessels travel to the region each year in search of marine species.

In 2017, a Chinese vessel was caught in the marine reserve with 300 tonnes of wildlife, most of it sharks.

"We are on alert, [conducting] surveillance, patrolling to avoid an incident such as what happened in 2017," Ecuadorean Defence Minister Oswaldo Jarrin told reporters.

There was no immediate comment from the Chinese authorities when contacted by BBC News.

The ex-mayor of Quito, Roque Sevilla, told The Guardian that a "protection strategy" was being designed for the islands.

"Unchecked Chinese fishing just on the edge of the protected zone is ruining Ecuador's efforts to protect marine life in the Galápagos," he said.

President Lenin Moreno has said that Ecuador will hold consultations with other Latin American countries with a coastline on the Pacific - Colombia, Peru, Chile, Panama and Costa Rica - in order to form a joint regional position concerning the "threat". "Because of that [natural] wealth in that area, we suffer immense pressure from international fishing fleets," he was reported as saying in El Universo newspaper.

The Galapagos Marine Reserve boasts large numbers of shark species, including endangered whale and hammerheads.

The Galapagos Islands are a Unesco World Heritage site renowned worldwide for their unique array of plants and wildlife.

Charles Darwin made observations critical to his theory of evolution on the islands.

[Mexico] Ex-Pemex boss asserts innocence on corruption charges, vows to denounce others (Reuters)

Reuters [7/28/2020 10:47 PM, Dave Graham, 5304K, Negative]

The former boss of Mexican state oil firm Pemex, Emilio Lozoya, told a court on Tuesday he was innocent of graft charges and vowed to denounce those responsible for his alleged crimes, in a case that could seriously embarrass Mexico's previous rulers.

The trial of Lozoya is the highest-profile investigation so far in President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador's campaign to root out corruption in Mexico, which he has characterized as the biggest malaise plaguing the country.

The 45-year-old Lozoya, who was chief executive of Pemex - officially known as Petroleos Mexicanos - from 2012 to 2016 under former President Enrique Pena Nieto, attended an

initial court hearing Tuesday and faces another on Wednesday.

Federal prosecutors accused him of authorizing outlays worth hundreds of millions of dollars on a broken-down fertilizer plant called Agronitrogenados that Pemex acquired from Altos Hornos de Mexico, a steelmaker he is alleged to have taken bribes from. The heads of Altos Hornos have denied wrongdoing.

Lozoya's trial provides Lopez Obrador with a stage not just to show the corruption he says permeated rival administrations, but also to help explain the struggles faced by the massively indebted Pemex, which the president has vowed to revive.

During the hearing, prosecutors said the acquisition of the "obsolete" Agronitrogenados had blown a hole in Pemex's accounts and ended up costing the firm millions of dollars.

Lozoya, who was one of Pena Nieto's top aides, also stands accused of using illicit funds from his dealings with Altos Hornos de Mexico to buy a luxury property, and of having family members move money, including cash, in Swiss bank accounts.

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, reporters could not attend the hearing, and judicial authorities informed the media of proceedings remotely.

Lozoya, who has denied wrongdoing, told the hearing he would prove he was not responsible for or guilty of the crimes ascribed to him, judicial authorities said.

Lozoya claimed to have been intimidated and "used" during the events under investigation, and vowed to "denounce" the authors of the crimes, the authorities added, without giving details.

Mexican media for weeks have speculated that Lozoya could inform against former colleagues in the last government in order to reduce any potential sentence.

Prosecutors also allege that before becoming Pemex boss, Lozoya solicited and received funds from Brazilian firm Odebrecht and funneled cash into Pena Nieto's 2012 presidential campaign. At Pemex, Lozoya then awarded contracts to Odebrecht, they contend. Odebrecht has admitted paying bribes in Mexico.

A hearing into the Odebrecht case is due on Wednesday.

As proceedings concluded on Tuesday, the presiding judge said Lozoya would not be held in custody during the trial but had to wear an electronic bracelet and could not leave Mexico. The judge also granted a request from prosecutors for six months to conclude the case as they gathered more evidence.

Lopez Obrador, who took office in December 2018, earlier called the case a "watershed" moment in the fight against corruption.

"This trial will help a lot to discover how they did it, where the money came from," he told a news conference.

Lawyers representing Lozoya, who was extradited from Spain earlier this month, have said he acted on Pena Nieto's orders in his dealings as Pemex CEO. Pena Nieto has not been charged and has rejected any suggestion of wrongdoing.

[Venezuela] US warns Venezuela vote will be worse than ever (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [7/28/2020 7:02 PM, Staff, 11261K, Negative]

The United States warned Tuesday that elections planned in Venezuela later this year would be deeply fraudulent, accusing leftist leader Nicolas Maduro of seeking to manipulate the outcome.

Venezuelan authorities have called December 6 elections for the National Assembly, the only government branch led by the opposition but which has been left powerless.

The regime-controlled Supreme Court had named directors of the electoral body, which expanded by two-thirds the number of seats in the legislature, citing a demographic increase in a country that has seen millions flee the crumbling economy.

"This is yet another demonstration that with Maduro still in power, and in a position to manipulate the elections and their outcome, there can be no free and fair election in Venezuela," said Elliott Abrams, the US special representative on Venezuela.

"The conditions for free and fair elections are actually much worse today than they were in May 2018, when Maduro held the presidential elections that democracies all over the world have said were fraudulent," he told reporters.

Since January 2019, the United States and some 60 other nations have recognized National Assembly speaker Juan Guaido as interim president, rejecting the conduct of the elections.

The United States has piled on sanctions, including trying to block exports of oil, the crucial money-maker for the regime.

But Maduro has remained in power with support of Venezuela's military, China and Russia.

An effort by Norway to mediate a solution in Venezuela ended in stalemate a year ago, but a Norwegian delegation recently returned to Caracas.

Abrams praised the Norwegian initiative but said he was not optimistic.

The regime has "been at the table several times but never seriously (and) never willing to negotiate the real question, which is a transition to democracy," he said.

Sub-Saharan Africa

UN report finds migrants face violence by African officials (AP)

AP [7/28/2020 6:10 PM, Jamey Keaten, 2164K, Negative]

A new U.N. refugee agency report on migrants who braved long and often-deadly land routes to Libya has found that government officials, such as border guards, police and

soldiers, in the African countries they crossed were responsible for nearly half of all cases of physical violence against them.

The finding, which is bound to raise calls for greater accountability, comes in a report Wednesday from refugee agency UNHCR and the Danish Refugee Council. It seeks to chronicle cases of violence and death that have been hard to track along the often deserted routes to Libya — the top launch pad for Mediterranean crossings toward Europe.

The report, entitled “On this journey, no one cares if you live or die,” also warns that the COVID-19 pandemic, which has led to border closures, could make such treks even more dangerous as human smugglers try riskier techniques to evade detection.

Based on nearly 16,000 interviews and data collected by the council’s Mixed Migration Center, the report found at least 1,750 people died on the journeys across both east and west Africa in 2018 and 2019 — making the land route one of the deadliest for migrants and refugees in the world.

UNHCR says the count is believed to fall far short of the actual death toll.

“We’ve learned report after report that there were abuses along those roads, either committed by security forces, either committed by smugglers and traffickers,” said Vincent Cochetel, UNHCR’s Special Envoy for the Central Mediterranean. “Now, we have much more detailed information as to where are the abuses committed, by whom they are committed. So no one can say: ‘We don’t know.’”

The report found 47 percent of incidents of physical violence reported by migrants along the entire route — both east and west — were reportedly caused by security forces, police, military, immigration officers and border guards, compared to 29 percent by smugglers.

The report divvies up much of Africa north of the Equator into three sections, and lays out individual accounts: Some spent a year detained in warehouses; others faced physical abuse from traffickers to extract payments; some faced sexual and gender-based violence at the hands of officials.

“On the West African routes leading to Libya, it’s mainly the security forces, immigration officials, border officials involved in acts of sexual, gender-based violence,” Cochetel said in an interview at UNHCR’s headquarters. “Whereas if we look at other type of physical abuse along the routes, the majority of the perpetrators are smugglers, traffickers or criminal gangs associated with them.”

The authors say more work is needed to boost protections for the people on the move, and provide better, legal alternatives for their journeys, and cited “pockets of progress” such as through arrests of some criminals responsible.

“There has to be proper accountability for those crimes. There do have to be very accessible complaint mechanisms on access to justice for victims of trafficking once they have reached safety,” said Cochetel — adding that home, transit and destination countries need to be involved in that.

[Tanzania] My Tanzanian family is split over coronavirus' (Yahoo News/BBC)

Yahoo News/BBC [7/28/2020 8:57 PM, Staff, 11261K, Neutral]

BBC Tanzania reporter Sammy Awami writes that President John Magufuli's faith-based approach to coronavirus has caused tension in his family.

Since the first case of coronavirus was confirmed in Tanzania in March, I have been bombarded with messages and phone calls from colleagues, friends and family members living abroad.

They've been wondering: how did a country with some of the most relaxed coronavirus measures in Africa manage to so far escape the kind of crisis which has visited many parts of the world.

It's a question puzzling even those of us who are living in the country.

President Magufuli was among the few leaders who declined to impose any sort of lockdown and has scorned what he's termed unnecessary panic in other countries.

Yet, despite what many of his critics - and the more anxious among us - feared was a woefully reckless approach, the nation seems to have avoided for now the catastrophic number of deaths that many anticipated.

The most confusing thing about all of this, is that no-one really knows how.

One of the issues is that we don't have any figures to go on.

President Magufuli chose to put statistics in lockdown rather than people.

As analyst Aidan Eyakuze said: "He officially made the country operate in data darkness."

Three doctors I spoke to off record said hospitals had not been overwhelmed.

Some would argue that they support the government's narrative because of fear of possible retaliation if they were to speak out.

The president of the Medical Association of Tanzania, Dr Elisha Osati, has said there has never been a cover up, but he now wants to run for parliament as a candidate for the governing Chama Cha Mapinduzi party.

In a situation where the government is not releasing figures and journalists cannot access health facilities to investigate independently, it's the doctors' word against their doubters.

While some government health officials warned the public that the virus posed a real threat and urged them to follow basic hygiene guidelines, the president encouraged people to carry on with their business and pray to God for protection.

As a devout Catholic, he told a congregation of worshippers that prayers are where "true healing" is found, and the disease had been been "eliminated thanks to God".

The president's stance made things awkward between me and both my immediate and extended family.

Most of my close relatives are supporters of the president and all of them are die-hard, thoroughly devout Christians.

From the very start of the outbreak, when daily reports of case numbers started to climb, I became increasingly worried about their safety.

But the creeping politicisation of coronavirus in the country made it hard to convince some of my loved ones that they needed to take precautions.

The family WhatsApp group became a battleground.

It was flooded with a cocktail of re-shared media supporting the president and pseudo-science urging people to throw caution to the wind and hope for the best.

They were also anxious about the loss of income that could result from a fierce lockdown.

And as we learnt of the police brutality used in neighbouring countries to enforce such restrictions, this was only compounded.

Take three of my uncles for instance, all of whom are full-time pastors.

For them, the church is not only their core spiritual and social community, it is also their main source of income.

My parents run a convenience store in their neighbourhood in the capital, Dodoma.

It's their sole source of income and a spot where they meet with their neighbours and friends on a daily basis.

Because they are older I was concerned that their daily movements put them at risk.

So, I set out to craft WhatsApp messages tailored to older family members to try to educate them about the pandemic, and convince them to stay at home.

Unlike people living in other countries, they do have a choice.

Do they listen to me, stay at home and lose their livelihood? Or follow the president's advice to carry on their business and pray for the best?

Of course they believe the virus is deadly. But they also believe in prayers - perhaps even more so when their earnings are on the line.

In a country where almost everyone identifies with one religion or another, and where the majority of people live hand-to-mouth, the president honed in on faith and income to promote his strategy.

The president also made sure to invent a new enemy in the fight against the pandemic - the West.

He consistently refers to powerful Westerners as "mabeberu", literally "male goats".

The term was coined during the independence struggle which referred to a colonialist. This resonates well with the older generation, like that of my parents and uncles.

Mr Magufuli alleged that the "mabeberu" and their cronies in the country were keen to use the virus to distract the country from achieving its economic goals.

In one of his freestyle speeches he even suggested that the West could plant the virus on imported goods just to hurt Tanzanians.

The president hearkened back to the era of measles and the early years of HIV/Aids, reminding people of a time when some parents stopped their children from visiting neighbours, for fear that their sons and daughters would be infected.

At this point the government's policy seems to be: "If people are not dropping dead in the streets, then life should go on."

It's a risky strategy, but one that many here are willing to accept, and pray that the government is right.

Network TV News Coverage

Coronavirus Vaccine Trials Begin to See Promising Results (ABC World News Tonight With David Muir)

(B) ABC World News Tonight With David Muir [7/28/2020 7:34 PM, Staff]

Just two days after Moderna started its critical final phase of human trials for its vaccine, there is new evidence that the vaccine might act quickly. It found 7 of 8 primates injected with the vaccine showed no detectable virus in their lungs just two days after exposure. Dr. Anthony Fauci is hopeful about Moderna's early results. "I am cautiously optimistic that as we get into the late Fall and early Winter, we will have an answer, and I believe it will be positive." Pharmaceutical giant Pfizer launched the final phase of their vaccine trial with 30,000 volunteers. Some of those volunteers will expose themselves to the virus in Florida where the cases are raging.

[Iran] Iranian Military Conducts War Games, Raising Tensions in Persian Gulf (CBS Evening News With Norah O'Donnell)

(B) CBS Evening News With Norah O'Donnell [7/28/2020 6:50 PM, Staff]

War games by the Iranian military are raising tensions again with the US in the Persian Gulf. Iran fired missiles at a mock US aircraft carrier. Iranian fast boats moved in and commandos boarded it from a helicopter. Two US air force bases in the region went on alert during the exercise. A Navy spokeswoman called Iran's behavior irresponsible and reckless.

[Iran] Two US Bases in Middle East Went on High Alert During Iranian Military Exercise (FOX News)

(B) FOX News [7/28/2020 7:23 PM, Staff]

Two bases in the Middle East housing US troops and aircraft went on high alert when an Iranian missile landed in waters near the bases. A senior US official says three Iranian missiles splashed down near two bases housing American troops as part of Tehran's military exercises in the Persian Gulf. American soldiers at an air base in the United Arab Emirates and a base in Qatar were told to quickly find shelter when the missiles were launched from Iran. Tensions have been high in the region since President Trump ordered the killing of a powerful Iranian general in a drone strike in Baghdad earlier this year.

[Russia] Federal Officials Warn Russia Using English Websites to Spread COVID-19 Disinformation (FOX News)

(B) FOX News [7/28/2020 10:17 PM, Staff]

Federal officials tell the Associated Press that Russian intelligence services are using a trio of English language websites to spread disinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic. One official said the three websites have published about a 150 articles propping up Russia and denigrating the US.

[China] Officials Begin Investigation Into Seeds Sent from China (CBS Evening News With Norah O'Donnell)

(B) CBS Evening News With Norah O'Donnell [7/28/2020 6:51 PM, Staff]

A growing number of people say they have received mysterious packets of seeds in their mailboxes. The seeds, apparently from China, have turned up unsolicited in at least 45 states. The Department of Agriculture is urging people not to plant them and has begun an investigation.

Headlines

The Washington Post

(7/29/2020 6:00 AM)

Trump shrugs at virus aid bill

In resisting masks, U.S. lost early virus weapon

Barr is confronted in caustic hearing

Politics at the point of a gun

The New York Times

(7/29/2020 6:00 AM)

From the Start, Federal Agents Demanded a Role in Suppressing Anti-Racism Protests

Barr Defends Protest Response and Criticizes Russia Inquiry Ahead of Testimony

Like Father, Like Son: President Trump Lets Others Mourn

'Amazing, Isn't It?' Long Sought Blood Test for Alzheimer's in Reach

The Wall Street Journal

(7/29/2020 6:00 AM)

William Barr Defends Federal Deployments to Break Up Protests in Tense Hearing

Facebook Offers Money to Reel In TikTok Creators

Big Tech to Appear Before Congress on Wednesday
Back-to-College Plans Devolve Into a Jumble of Fast-Changing Rules
AMC, Universal Agree to Trim Theatrical Window Before Movies Go Online

ABC News

(7/29/2020 6:00 AM)

Flooding, mudslides hit northern Japan after heavy rainfall
Yemen's separatists to give up self-rule, push peace deal
Hong Kong protest leader fired from university teaching job

CBS News

(7/29/2020 6:00 AM)

Mystery seeds from China are landing in Americans' mail boxes
Iran fires missile at mock aircraft carrier resembling U.S. warship
Trump continues to defend drug hydroxychloroquine

CNN

(7/29/2020 6:00 AM)

Japan's air force faces a 'relentless' burden, imposed by China
Belarus President dismissed Covid-19 as 'psychosis.' Now he says he caught it
Russia prepares for world's first approval of a Covid-19 vaccine by mid-August, but questions remain

Fox News

(7/29/2020 6:00 AM)

Ecuador navy 'on alert' as 260-strong Chinese fleet nears Galapagos Islands
British-Australian woman jailed in Tehran moved to Iran's notorious and remote Qarchak prison
Head of Chinese CDC says he's taking experimental coronavirus drug

NBC News

(7/29/2020 6:00 AM)

Yemeni blogger jailed by Saudi court for supporting equal gay rights: group
Europe faces down a second coronavirus pandemic wave
Afghan government says negotiations with Taliban slated to start in 'week's time'

Washington Schedule**President**

The White House

(7/29/2020 6:00 AM)

7:00 AM In-House Pool Call Time
7:55 AM Out-of-Town Pool Call Time
9:00 AM The President departs the White House en route to Joint Base Andrews
9:10 AM The President arrives at Joint Base Andrews
9:20 AM The President departs Washington, D.C., en route to Midland, TX
12:30 PM The President arrives at Midland International Air and Space Port

12:40 PM The President departs Midland, TX, en route to Odessa, TX
1:00 PM The President arrives at Odessa Marriott Hotel and Conference Center
1:35 PM The President participates in a roundtable with supporters
2:05 PM The President delivers remarks at a fundraising committee reception
3:10 PM The President departs Odessa, TX, en route to Midland, TX
3:45 PM The President arrives at Double Eagle Energy Oil Rig
3:50 PM The President participates in a tour of Double Eagle Energy Oil Rig
4:20 PM The President delivers remarks on restoring energy dominance in the Permian Basin and signs Presidential Permits
5:05 PM The President departs Double Eagle Energy Oil Rig en route to Midland International Air and Space Port
5:30 PM The President arrives at Midland International Air and Space Port
5:40 PM The President departs Midland, TX, en route to Washington, D.C.
8:45 PM The President arrives at Joint Base Andrews
8:55 PM The President departs Joint Base Andrews en route to the White House
9:05 PM The President arrives at the White House

Vice President

The White House

(7/29/2020 6:00 AM)

See source link. Schedule not yet available.

Senate

Senate

(7/29/2020 6:00 AM)

10:00 a.m.: Convene and proceed to executive session to resume consideration of the nomination of Derek Kan, of California, to be Deputy Director of the Office of Management and Budget.

9:00 AM – SR-325 Foreign Relations

Business meeting to consider the nominations of Natalie E. Brown, of Nebraska, to be Ambassador to the Republic of Uganda, Sandra E. Clark, of Maryland, to be Ambassador to Burkina Faso, William Ellison Grayson, of California, to be Ambassador to the Republic of Estonia, Joseph Manso, of New York, for the rank of Ambassador during his tenure of service as United States Representative to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, Richard M. Mills, Jr., of Texas, to be the Deputy Representative of the United States of America to the United Nations, with the rank and status of Ambassador and the Deputy Representative of the United States of America in the Security Council of the United Nations, and to be Representative of the United States of America to the Sessions of the General Assembly of the United Nations, during his tenure of service as Deputy Representative of the United States of America to the United Nations, Henry T. Wooster, of Virginia, to be Ambassador to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, William W. Popp, of Missouri, to be Ambassador to the Republic of Guatemala, Aldona Z. Wos, of North Carolina, to be Ambassador to Canada, C.J. Mahoney, of Kansas, to be Legal Adviser, Leora Rosenberg Levy, of Connecticut, to be Ambassador to the Republic of Chile, Carlos Trujillo, of Florida, to be an Assistant Secretary (Western Hemisphere Affairs), Lisa S. Kenna, of Vermont, to be Ambassador to the Republic of Peru, Marshall Billingslea, of Virginia, to be Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security, and promotion

lists in the Foreign Service, all of the Department of State, Jason Myung-Ik Chung, of Virginia, to be United States Director of the Asian Development Bank, with the rank of Ambassador, J. Steven Dowd, of Florida, to be United States Director of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and Ramsey Coats Day, of Virginia, to be an Assistant Administrator, and Jenny A. McGee, of Texas, to be an Associate Administrator, both of the of the United States Agency for International Development.

10:00 AM – SD-106 Environment and Public Works

Hearings to examine lessons learned from remote working during COVID-19, focusing on if the government can maximize use of leased space.

10:00 AM – SD-226 Judiciary

Hearings to examine the nominations of J. Philip Calabrese, and James Ray Knepp II, both to be a United States District Judge for the Northern District of Ohio, Aileen Mercedes Cannon, to be United States District Judge for the Southern District of Florida, Toby Crouse, to be United States District Judge for the District of Kansas, and Michael Jay Newman, to be United States District Judge for the Southern District of Ohio.

10:00 AM – SR-253 Commerce, Science, and Transportation

Hearings to examine building a stronger and more resilient seafood sector.

10:00 AM – WEBCAST Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

Hearings to examine human rights at home, focusing on values made visible.

10:00 AM – WEBEX Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs

Hearings to examine the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau's semi-annual report to Congress.

10:15 AM – SD-215 Finance

Hearings to examine WTO reform, focusing on making global rules work for global challenges.

2:00 PM – SD-G50 Veterans' Affairs

Hearings to examine VA telehealth during and beyond COVID-19, focusing on challenges and opportunities in rural America.

2:00 PM – SVC-217 Intelligence

Closed business meeting to consider pending intelligence matters; to be immediately followed by a closed hearing to examine certain intelligence matters.

2:30 PM – SD-628 Indian Affairs

Business meeting to consider S.1161, to support the education of Indian children, S.2165, to enhance protections of Native American tangible cultural heritage, S.2610, to reauthorize certain programs under the Office of Indian Energy Policy and Programs of the Department of Energy, S.2716, to amend the Grand Ronde Reservation Act, S.2891, to require the Secretary of the Interior to establish Tribal Wildlife Corridors, S.2912, to direct the Secretary of the Interior to take certain land located in Pinal County, Arizona, into trust for the benefit of the Gila River Indian Community, S.3019, to protect access to water for all Montanans, S.3044, to amend the American's Water Infrastructure Act of 2018 to expand the Indian

reservation drinking water program, S.3099, to provide for the conveyance of certain property to the Southeast Alaska Regional Health Consortium located in Sitka, Alaska, S.3100, to convey land in Anchorage, Alaska, to the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, S.3650, to amend the Indian Health Care Improvement Act to deem employees of urban Indian organizations as part of the Public Health Service for certain purposes, and S.3948, to amend the Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children Act to extend the deadline for a report by the Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children; to be immediately followed by an oversight hearing to examine how to safely reopen Bureau of Indian Education schools, focusing on preparing to head back to class.

House of Representatives

House of Representatives

(7/29/2020 6:00 AM)

9:20 AM | 2141 Rayburn HOB

Business Meeting: Request for a Department of Homeland Security Departmental Report on the Beneficiaries of H.R. 7572

Host: Committee on the Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration and Citizenship

9:30 AM | 2154 Rayburn HOB

Hearing: Counting Every Person: Safeguarding the 2020 Census Against the Trump Administrations Unconstitutional Attacks

Host: Committee on Oversight and Reform

9:30 AM | 2141 Rayburn HOB

Hearing: Oversight of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

Host: Committee on the Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration and Citizenship

10:00 AM | 2172 Rayburn HOB

Markup: Markup of Various Measures

Host: Committee on Foreign Affairs

10:00 AM | 2167 Rayburn HOB

Markup: FC Markup on Multiple Bills

Host: Committee on Natural Resources

10:00 AM

Hearing: "Improving Access to Care: Legislation to Reauthorize Key Public Health Programs" Virtual Hearing

Host: Committee on Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Health

10:00 AM

Business Meeting: Who's in Charge? Examining Oversight of State Veterans Homes During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Host: Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Health

10:00 AM | 2360 Select one

Hearing: POSTPONED: Kick Starting Entrepreneurship and Main Street Economic

Recovery

Host: Committee on Small Business Subcommittee on Rural Development, Agriculture, Trade, and Entrepreneurship

12:00 PM | 2141 Rayburn HOB

Hearing: Online Platforms and Market Power Part 6: Examining the Dominance of Amazon Apple Facebook and Google

Host: Committee on the Judiciary Subcommittee on Antitrust, Commercial, and Administrative Law

2:00 PM | 2172 Rayburn HOB

Hearing: Diversity and Diplomacy: Assessing the State Departments Record in Promoting Diversity and Inclusion

Host: Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee Oversight and Investigations

{End of Report}

Sender: (b)(6) @state.gov>

Recipient: Legal-L-Attorneys-DL <Legal-L-Attorneys-DL@state.gov>

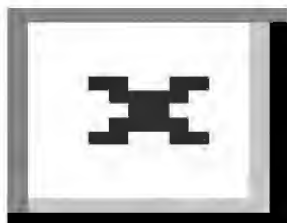
From: (b)(6) @state.gov>
(b)(6) @state.gov>;
Turner, Bruce I <(b)(6) @state.gov>;
(b)(6) @state.gov>;
To: Gross, Laura J (b)(6) @state.gov>;
Gibbs, Jeffrey J (b)(6) @state.gov>;
(b)(6) @state.gov>;
(b)(6) @state.gov>;
(b)(6) @state.gov>
Subject: WHO team arrives in Wuhan to investigate pandemic origins
Date: Thu, 14 Jan 2021 13:30:04 +0000

FYI



WHO team arrives in Wuhan to investigate pandemic origins

By SAM McNEIL and HUIZHONG WU 2 hours ago



WUHAN, China (AP) — A global team of researchers arrived Thursday in the Chinese city where the coronavirus pandemic was first detected to conduct a politically sensitive investigation into its origins amid uncertainty about whether Beijing might try to prevent embarrassing discoveries.

The group sent to Wuhan by the World Health Organization was approved by President Xi Jinping's government after months of diplomatic wrangling that prompted an unusual public complaint by the head of WHO.

Scientists suspect the virus that has killed more than 1.9 million people since late 2019 jumped to humans from bats or other animals, most likely in China's southwest. The ruling Communist Party, stung by complaints it allowed the disease to spread, says the virus came from abroad, possibly on imported seafood, but international scientists reject that.

Fifteen team members were to arrive in Wuhan on Thursday, but two tested positive for coronavirus antibodies before leaving Singapore and were being retested there, WHO said in a statement on Twitter.

The rest of the team arrived at the Wuhan airport and walked through a makeshift clear plastic tunnel into the airport. The researchers, who wore face masks, were greeted by airport staff in full protective gear, including masks, goggles and full body suits.

They will undergo a two-week quarantine as well as a throat swab test and an antibody test for COVID-19, according to CGTN, the English-language channel of state broadcaster CCTV. They are to start working with Chinese experts via video conference while in quarantine.

The team includes virus and other experts from the United States, Australia, Germany, Japan, Britain, Russia, the Netherlands, Qatar and Vietnam.

A government spokesman said this week they will "exchange views" with Chinese scientists but gave no indication whether they would be allowed to gather evidence.

China rejected demands for an international investigation after the Trump administration blamed Beijing for the virus's spread, which plunged the global economy into its deepest slump since the 1930s.

After Australia called in April for an independent inquiry, Beijing retaliated by blocking imports of Australian beef, wine and other goods.

One possibility is that a wildlife poacher might have passed the virus to traders who carried it to Wuhan, one of the WHO team members, zoologist Peter Daszak of the U.S. group EcoHealth Alliance, told The Associated Press in November.

A single visit by scientists is unlikely to confirm the virus's origins; pinning down an outbreak's animal reservoir is typically an exhaustive endeavor that takes years of research including taking animal samples, genetic analysis and epidemiological studies.

"The government should be very transparent and collaborative," said Shin-Ru Shih, director at the Research Center for Emerging Viral Infections at Taiwan's Chang Gung University.

The Chinese government has tried to stir confusion about the virus's origin. It has promoted theories, with little evidence, that the outbreak might have started with imports of tainted seafood, a notion rejected by international scientists and agencies.

"The WHO will need to conduct similar investigations in other places," an official of the National Health Commission, Mi Feng, said Wednesday.

Some members of the WHO team were en route to China a week ago but had to turn back after Beijing announced they hadn't received valid visas.

That might have been a "bureaucratic bungle," but the incident "raises the question if the Chinese authorities were trying to interfere," said Adam Kamradt-Scott, a health expert at the University of Sydney.

A possible focus for investigators is the Wuhan Institute of Virology in the city where the outbreak first emerged. One of China's top virus research labs, it built an archive

of genetic information about bat coronaviruses after the 2003 outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome.

According to WHO's published agenda for its origins research, there are no plans to assess whether there might have been an accidental release of the coronavirus at the Wuhan lab, as some American politicians, including President Donald Trump, have claimed.

A "scientific audit" of Institute records and safety measures would be a "routine activity," said Mark Woolhouse, an epidemiologist at the University of Edinburgh. He said that depends on how willing Chinese authorities are to share information.

"There's a big element of trust here," Woolhouse said.

An AP investigation found the government imposed controls on research into the outbreak and bars scientists from speaking to reporters.

The coronavirus's exact origin may never be traced because viruses change quickly, Woolhouse said.

A year after the virus was first detected in Wuhan, the city is now bustling, with few signs that it was once the epicenter of the outbreak in China. But some residents say they're still eager to learn about its origin.

"We locals care about this very much. We are curious where the pandemic came from and what the situation was. We live here so we are keen to know," said Qin Qiong, owner of a chain of restaurants serving hot and sour noodles. She said she trusts in science to solve the question.

Although it may be challenging to find precisely the same COVID-19 virus in animals as in humans, discovering closely related viruses might help explain how the disease first jumped from animals and clarify what preventive measures are needed to avoid future epidemics.

Scientists should focus instead on making a "comprehensive picture" of the virus to help respond to future outbreaks, Woolhouse said.

“Now is not the time to blame anyone,” Shih said. “We shouldn’t say, it’s your fault.”

Wu reported from Taipei, Taiwan.

https://apnews.com/article/pandemics-beijing-animals-xi-jinping-coronavirus-pandemic-db3e9adcbfa801d3e8274c1976ea5fcd?utm_campaign=SocialFlow&utm_source=Twitter&utm_medium=AP

(b)(6)

Director, Office of Verification, Planning, and Outreach
Bureau of Arms Control, Verification and Compliance
U.S. Department of State

(b)(6)

(b)(6) @state.gov

(b)(6)

From: (b)(6)@state.gov>
(b)(6)@state.gov>;
To: Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>
(b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>;
CC: (b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>;
Gibbs, Jeffrey J (b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: The genetic structure of SARS-CoV-2 does not rule out a laboratory origin
Date: Tue, 17-Nov-2020 22:53:48 -0800

Retention Signature

Just out, (below and attached) a report that comes highly recommended from a very reliable source:

From the conclusion:

On the basis of our analysis, an artificial origin of SARS-CoV-2 is not a baseless conspiracy theory that is to be condemned^[66] and researchers have the responsibility to consider all possible causes for SARS-CoV-2 emergence. The insertion of human-adapted pangolin CoV RBD obtained by cell/animal serial passage and furin cleavage site could arise from site-directed mutagenesis experiments, in a context of evolutionary studies or development of pan-CoV vaccines or drugs. A recent article in Nature^[67] affirms that a laboratory origin for SARS-CoV-2 cannot be ruled out, as researchers could have been infected accidentally, and that gain-of-function experiments resulting in SARS-CoV-2 could have been performed at WIV. Genetic manipulation of SARS-CoV-2 may have been carried out in any laboratory in the world with access to the backbone sequence and the necessary equipment and it would not leave any trace. Modern technologies based on synthetic genetics platforms allow the reconstruction of viruses based on their genomic sequence, without the need of a natural isolate.^[68]

A thorough investigation on strain collections and research records in all laboratories involved in CoV research before SARS-CoV-2 outbreak is urgently needed. Special attention should be paid to strains of CoVs that were generated in

virology laboratories but have not yet been published, as those possibly described in the deleted WIV database. Because finding a possible natural host could take years, as with the first SARS,^[67] or never succeed, equal priority should be given to investigating natural and laboratory origins of SARS-CoV-2.

Xiao Qiang, a research scientist at Berkeley, recently stated: "To understand exactly how this virus has originated is critical knowledge for preventing this from happening in the future."^[xxii]

The genetic structure of SARS-CoV-2 does not rule out a laboratory origin

SARS-COV-2 chimeric structure and furin cleavage site might be the result of genetic manipulation

Rossana Segreto

Yuri Deigin

17 November 2020

<https://doi.org/10.1002/bies.202000240>

Abstract

Severe acute respiratory syndrome-coronavirus (SARS-CoV)-2's origin is still controversial. Genomic analyses show SARS-CoV-2 likely to be chimeric, most of its sequence closest to bat CoV RaTG13, whereas its receptor binding domain (RBD) is almost identical to that of a pangolin CoV. Chimeric viruses can arise *via* natural recombination or human intervention. The furin cleavage site in the spike protein of SARS-CoV-2 confers to the virus the ability to cross species and tissue barriers, but was previously unseen in other SARS-like CoVs. Might genetic manipulations have been performed in order to evaluate pangolins as possible intermediate hosts for bat-derived CoVs that were originally unable to bind to human receptors? Both cleavage site and specific RBD could result from site-directed mutagenesis, a procedure that does not leave a trace. Considering the devastating impact of SARS-CoV-2 and importance of preventing future pandemics, researchers have a responsibility to carry out a thorough analysis of all possible SARS-CoV-2 origins.

INTRODUCTION

Nearly a year has passed since the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome-coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) in Wuhan, China, and its origin is still controversial. Despite the international

research effort conducted, a natural host, either direct or intermediate, has not yet been identified. The hypothesis that the Wuhan Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market was the first source for animal–human virus transmission has now been conclusively dismissedⁱ and the few market samples that were collected showed only human-adapted SARS-CoV-2, with no traces of zoonotic predecessor strainsⁱⁱ. Almost all scientific papers published to date purport that SARS-CoV-2 has a natural origin, and the only published paper considering possible a lab originⁱⁱⁱ focuses on serial passage as the technique that could justify SARS-CoV-2 special adaptation to human cells. We here describe how the two main SARS-CoV-2 features, (1) the presence of a furin cleavage site missing in other CoVs of the same group and (2) an receptor binding domain (RBD) optimized to bind to human cells^{iv} might be the result of lab manipulation techniques such as site-directed mutagenesis. The acquisition of both unique features by SARS-CoV-2 more or less simultaneously is less likely to be natural or caused only by cell/animal serial passage.

SARS-COV-2'S CLOSEST RELATIVES ARE BAT AND PANGOLIN CORONAVIRUSES

Zhou et al.^[1] from the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) were the first to identify and characterize a new coronavirus (CoV), SARS-CoV-2. The genomic sequences obtained from early cases shared 79% sequence identity to the CoVs that caused severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS-CoV) in 2002–2003 and 96.2% sequence identity to RaTG13 (MN996532), a CoV sequence detected from a *Rhinolophus affinis* bat. RaTG13 is currently the closest phylogenetic relative for SARS-CoV-2 found,^[2] but its complete genomic sequence was not published before the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2 and the original sample was collected in the Yunnan province (China) by the same group of WIV researchers in 2013. Zhou et al.^[3] stated to have found a match between SARS-CoV-2 and a short region of RNA-dependent RNA polymerase (RdRp) of a CoV in their database and then fully sequenced the original sample collected in 2013, which they called RaTG13.

We discovered that the RdRp of RaTG13 has 100% nucleotide identity with the sequence BtCoV/4991 (KP876546), which was identified by Ge et al.^[5] in a *Rhinolophus affinis* bat in the Yunnan province in 2013, same location and year as RaTG13. BtCoV/4991 was collected in a mine colonized by bats near Tongguanzen, Mojiang, Yunnan. The WIV researchers were invited to investigate the mine after six miners there had contracted severe pneumonia in 2012ⁱⁱⁱ, and three of the miners have died.^[6] The miners have been tasked with clearing out bat droppings in the mine, and the severity of their pneumonia correlated with the duration of

exposure to the mine.^[7] Four miners' samples subsequently underwent testing at WIV, where Immunoglobulin G (IgG) antibodies against SARS were identified in all samples.^[8] Considering that only about 5300 people were infected in mainland China during the SARS outbreak of 2002–2004, most of whom resided in Guangdong, the odds of four miners in Yunnan retaining antibodies from the 2002–2004 SARS outbreak are negligible. On the other hand, it is possible that the SARS antibody test administered to the miners cross-reacted with a novel SARS-like bat virus that the miners had acquired at the mine. Ge et al.^[9] have identified a number of CoVs in the mine, but based on the phylogenetic analysis, BtCoV/4991 was the only SARS-related strain, clearly separated from all known alpha- and beta-CoVs at that time. BtCoV/4991 was also different from other bat CoVs in the phylogenetic analysis carried out by Wang et al. in 2019.^[9] Chen et al.^[10] identified BtCoV/4991 as the closest sequence to SARS-CoV-2 because RaTG13 had not yet been published at that time. BtCoV/4991 and RaTG13 have been later asserted to be two different coding names of the same strain, as their original authors at WIV registered the two strains as one entry in the Database of Bat-associated Viruses (DBatVir).^{ix}

In late July 2020, Zhengli Shi, the leading CoV researcher from WIV, in an email interview ^[11] asserted the renaming of the RaTG13 sample and unexpectedly declared that the full sequencing of RaTG13 has been carried out as far back as in 2018 and not after the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak, as stated in Zhou et al.^[3] The reversal in WIV's stance on when exactly RaTG13 was fully sequenced could have been due to the discovery by independent researchers into the origins of SARS-CoV-2 that the filenames of the raw sequencing reads deposited by WIV on May 19, 2020^y seem to indicate that sequencing for RaTG13 was done in 2017 and 2018.^{vi} However, no formal erratum about year of sequencing and sample renaming from the authors of Zhou et al. ^[3] has yet appeared, or as far as is currently known, has been submitted.

The second non-human RdRp sequence closest to BtCoV/4991 (91.89% nucleotide identity) is the CoV sequence MP789 (MT084071) isolated in 2019 in a Malaysian pangolin (*Manis javanica*) from the Guangdong province (GD), China.^[12] The envelope protein of MP789 shows surprisingly 100% aminoacidic identity with the corresponding protein in RaTG13, in bat-SL-CoVZXC21 (MG772934.1), in bat-SL-CoVZC45 (MG772933.1) and in some early SARS-CoV-2 isolates (e.g. YP_009724392).^[13] The envelope protein of CoVs is involved in critical aspects of the viral lifecycle, such as viral entry, replication and pathogenesis.^[14]

BAT COVS HAVE BEEN THOROUGHLY STUDIED AND GENETICALLY MANIPULATED

Many studies have reported that bats are natural reservoirs for a broad diversity of potentially pathogenic SARS-like CoVs.^[15, 16] Some of these viruses can potentially directly infect humans^[17], whereas others need to mutate their spike protein in order to effectively bind to the human angiotensin 1-converting enzyme 2 (hACE2) receptor and mediate virus entry.^[18] In order to evaluate the emergence potential of novel CoVs, researchers have created a number of chimeric CoVs, consisting of bat CoV backbones, normally unable to infect human cells, whose spike proteins were replaced by those from CoVs compatible with human ACE2. These chimeras were meant to simulate recombination events that might occur in nature.^[19, 20] Such gain-of-function experiments have raised a number of biosafety concerns and stirred controversy among researchers and the general public. One of the main arguments in favor of gain-of-function studies is the need to be prepared with an arsenal of drugs and vaccines for the next pandemic.^[21] By contrast, one of the main arguments against them is that the next pandemic itself could be caused by those experiments, due to the risk of lab escape.^[22, 23]

In recent years, the field of corona-virology had been focused on pan-CoV therapies and vaccines, as evident from research conducted in the past 5 years,^[24-27] as well as from media reports.vii Synthetically generating diverse panels of potential pre-emergent CoVs was declared a goal of active grants for the EcoHealth Alliance, which funded some of such research at WIV, in collaboration with laboratories in the USA and other international partners.viii

CREATING CHIMERIC COVS WITH NOVEL RBDS HAS GONE ON FOR DECADES

Researchers have been generating chimeric CoVs for over two decades, long before the advent of modern sequencing or genetic engineering techniques. For example, in 1999, a group from Utrecht University used targeted RNA recombination to create a “cat-and-mouse” CoV chimera: the RBDs of a feline and murine CoV were swapped, demonstrating that this exchange swapped also species tropism during *in vitro* experiments.^[28]

In 2007, the Shi group at WIV created a series of “bat-man” CoV chimeric spike proteins while trying to determine what exactly confers CoVs the ability to jump from one species to another. The researchers used different segments of the spike protein of the human SARS virus to replace corresponding segments in the spike protein of a bat viral backbone. It was concluded that a

relatively short region (aa 310 to 518) of the spike protein “was necessary and sufficient to convert Rp3-S into a huACE2-binding molecule,”²⁹ that is to provide the bat CoV spike protein with a novel ability of binding to a human ACE2 receptor.

In 2008, the Baric group at the University of North Carolina (UNC) took the WIV research one step further: instead of using human immunodeficiency viruses (HIV) pseudo-viruses with bat CoV spike proteins, a live chimeric CoV was created. Following the experiments of their 2007 WIV colleagues, the Baric group used a bat SARS-like CoV as a backbone and replaced its RBD with the RBD from human SARS.^[30]

In 2015, the Shi and Baric groups joined forces and published probably the most famous gain-of-function virology paper, which described the creation of another synthetic chimeric virus.^[19] This time the RBD of a mouse-adapted SARS backbone (SARS-MA15) was replaced by the RBD of RsSHC014, a bat strain previously isolated from Yunnan bats in 2011 by the Shi group. In 2016, the Baric group repeated their 2015 experiment using the same SARS-MA15 backbone and the RBD from Rs3367,^[31] a close relative of RsSHC014 also previously found in Yunnan by WIV and renamed “WIV1” after live culturing.^[17]

Probably the largest reported number of novel chimeric viruses created was described in a 2017 paper from the Shi group at WIV,^[15] in which the authors reported creating eight chimeric viruses using WIV1 as a backbone and transplanting into it various RBDs from bat SARS-like viruses. These viruses were collected over a span of 5 years from the same cave near Kunming, Yunnan Province, where the Shi group originally found Rs3367 and RsSHC014. Only two of the eight live chimeric viruses were successfully rescued, and those two strains were found to possess the ability to bind to the human ACE2 receptor, as confirmed by experiments in hACE2-expressing HeLa cells and RT-PCR quantification of viral RNA.

SARS-COV-2 SHARES ITS RBD WITH A PANGOLIN COV

The possibility that pangolins could be the intermediate host for SARS-CoV-2 has long been under discussion.^[32-34] The biggest divergence between SARS-CoV-2 and RaTG13 is observed in the RBD of their spike proteins.^[4] Although its overall genome similarity is lower to SARS-CoV-2 than that of RaTG13, the MP789 pangolin strain isolated from GD pangolins has an almost identical RBD to that of SARS-CoV-2. Indeed, pangolin CoVs and SARS-CoV-2 possess identical amino acids at the five critical residues of the RBD, whereas RaTG13 only shares one amino acid with SARS-CoV-2.^[35] ACE2 sequence similarity is higher between

humans and pangolins than between humans and bats. Intriguingly, the spike protein of SARS-CoV-2 has a higher predicted binding affinity to human ACE2 receptor than to that of pangolins and bats.^{ix} Before the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak, pangolins were the only mammals other than bats documented to carry and be infected by SARS-CoV-2 related CoV.^[12] Recombination events between the RBD of CoV from pangolins and RaTG13-like backbone could have produced SARS-CoV-2 as chimeric strain. For such recombination to occur naturally, the two viruses must have infected the same cell in the same organism simultaneously, a rather improbable event considering the low population density of pangolins and the scarce presence of CoVs in their natural populations.^x Moreover, receptor binding studies of reconstituted RaTG13 showed that it does not bind to pangolin ACE2.^{xi}

THE FURIN CLEAVAGE SITE: THE KEY DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SARS-COV-2 AND ITS CLOSEST RELATIVE RATG13

SARS-CoV-2 differs from its closest relative RaTG13 by a few key characteristics. The most striking difference is the acquisition in the spike protein of SARS-CoV-2 of a cleavage site activated by a host-cell enzyme furin, previously not identified in other beta-CoVs of lineage b^[36] and similar to that of Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) coronavirus.^[33] Host protease processing plays a pivotal role as a species and tissue barrier and engineering of the cleavage sites of CoV spike proteins modifies virus tropism and virulence.^[37] The ubiquitous expression of furin in different organs and tissues have conferred to SARS-CoV-2 the ability to infect organs usually invulnerable to other CoVs, leading to systemic infection in the body.^[38] Cell-cultured SARS-CoV-2 that was missing the above-mentioned cleavage site caused attenuated symptoms in infected hamsters,^[39] and mutagenesis studies have confirmed that the polybasic furin site is essential for SARS-CoV-2's ability to infect human lung cells.^[40]

The polybasic furin site in SARS-CoV-2 was created by a 12-nucleotide insert TCCTCGGCGGGC coding for a PRRA amino acid sequence at the S1/S2 junction (Figure 1). Interestingly, the two joint arginines are coded by two CGGCGG codons, which are rare for these viruses: only 5% of arginines are coded by CGG in SARS-CoV-2 or RaTG13, and CGGCGG in the new insert is the only doubled instance of this codon in SARS-CoV-2. The CGGCGG insert includes a *FauI* restriction site, of which there are six instances in SARS-CoV-2 and four instances in RaTG13 (and two in MP789). The serendipitous location of the *FauI* site could allow using restriction fragment length polymorphism (RFLP)

techniques ^[41] for cloning ^[42] or screening for mutations, ^[43] as the new furin site is prone to deletions *in vitro*.^[39, 44]

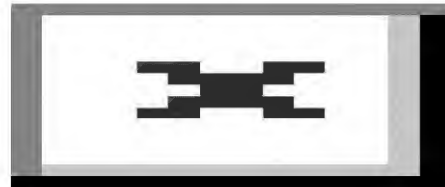


FIGURE 1

[Open in figure viewerPowerPoint](#)

Nucleotide sequence of the S protein at the S1/S2 junction in SARS-CoV-2 (NC045512.2) showing the furin cleavage site (in blue) that includes a *FauI* enzyme restriction site

A study by Zhou et al.^[45] reported the discovery of a novel CoV strain RmYN02, which the authors claim exhibits natural PAA amino acid insertions at the S1/S2 cleavage site where SARS-CoV-2 has the PRRA insertion. However, upon close examination of the underlying nucleotide sequence of RmYN02 in comparison with its closest ancestors bat-SL-CoVZC45 and bat-SL-CoVZXC21, no insertions are apparent, just nucleotide mutations (Figure 2).

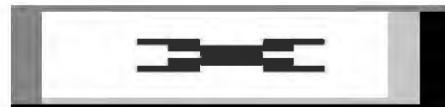


FIGURE 2

[Open in figure viewerPowerPoint](#)

Alignment of nucleotide and amino acid sequences of the S protein from bat-SL-CoVZC45 (MG772933.1) and RmYN02 at the S1/S2 junction site. No insertions of nucleotides possibly evolving in a furin cleavage site can be observed (in blue)

Therefore, SARS-CoV-2 remains unique among its beta CoV relatives not only due to a polybasic furin site at the S1/S2 junction, but also due to the four amino acid insert PRRA that had created it. The insertion causes a split in the original codon for serine (TCA) in MP789 or RaTG13 to give part of a new codon for serine (TCT) and part of the amino acid alanine (GCA) in SARS-CoV-2 (Figure 3).

**FIGURE 3**

Open in figure viewerPowerPoint

Alignment of nucleotide and amino acid sequences of the S protein from RaTG13 (MN996532), MP789 (MT084071) and SARS-CoV-2 (NC045512.2) at the S1/S2 site. The common nucleotides and amino acids are given in black, SARS-CoV-2 unique nucleotides and amino acids in red, RaTG13 unique nucleotides and amino acids in green and common nucleotides and amino acids in SARS-CoV-2 and RaTG13 that differ in MP789 in blue. The codon forserine (TCA) in RaTG13 and MP789 is split in SARS-CoV-2 to give part of a new codon forserine (TCT) and part of the amino acidalanine (GCA)

The insertion of the furin cleavage site in SARS-CoV-2 is not in frame with the rest of the sequence, when compared with the MP789 and the RaTG13 sequences (Figure 3). Therefore, it is possible to exclude that such insertion could have originated by polymerase slippage or by releasing and repriming, because insertion mutations generated by these mechanisms have been postulated to maintain the reading frame of the viral sequence.^[46] The possibility that the furin cleavage site could have been acquired by recombination has been recently questioned by Seyran et al.,^[47] because the SARS-CoV-2 spike protein seems to lack any further recombination event in contrast with the recombination model of other CoVs.

CRITIQUE OF “THE PROXIMAL ORIGIN OF SARS-COV-2”

Due to the broad-spectrum of research conducted over almost 20 years on bat SARS-CoVs justified by their potential to spill over from animal to human,^[48] a possible synthetic origin by laboratory engineering of SARS-CoV-2 cannot be excluded. The widely cited article of Andersen et al.^[2] stated that SARS-CoV-2 has most likely a natural origin. The main argument brought by the authors is that the high-affinity binding of the SARS-CoV-2 spike protein to hACE2 could not have been predicted by models based on the RBD of SARS-CoV. Based on the structural analysis conducted by Wan et al.,^[49] SARS-CoV-2 has the potential to recognize hACE2 more efficiently than the SARS-CoV, which emerged in 2002. Moreover, generation of CoV chimeric strains has recently demonstrated that bat CoV spikes can bind to the hACE2 receptor with more plasticity than previously predicted.^[13] All amino acids in the RBD have been extensively analyzed and new models to predict ACE2 affinity are available.^[50] In this regard, BatCoV Rs3367 (99.9% identity to WIV1) has been shown to share with SARS-CoV-2 four out

of six critical residues in the RBD. Considering that WIV1 was shown to directly bind to hACE2, the same assumption could easily have been made about SARS-CoV-2 RBD.^[51]

As described above, creation of chimeric viruses has been carried out over the years with the purpose of studying the potential pathogenicity of bat CoVs for humans. In this context, SARS-CoV-2 could have been synthesized by combining a backbone similar to RaTG13 with the RBD of CoV similar to the one recently isolated from pangolins^[12], because the latter is characterized by a higher affinity with the hACE2 receptor. Such research could have aimed to identify pangolins as possible intermediate hosts for bat-CoV potentially pathogenic for humans. Subsequent serial cell or animal passage, as described by Sirotkin & Sirotkin^[1] could have provided the perfect adaptation of the RBD to the hACE2.

Regarding the furin cleavage site, Andersen et al.^[2] state that “the functional consequence of the polybasic cleavage site in SARS-CoV-2 is unknown.” New studies from several groups have lately identified this activation site as possibly enabling the virus to spread efficiently between humans and attack multiple organs.^[52] Experiments on proteolytic cleavage of CoV spike proteins have been recently suggested as future key studies to understand virus transmissibility in different hosts.^[50]

Andersen et al.^[2] also state, based on the work of Almazan et al.^[53] that “the genetic data irrefutably show that SARS-CoV-2 is not derived from any previously used virus backbone.” In the last 6 years before the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2 the number of potential bat backbones has been undeniably increased by several bat CoV screenings, last but not least bringing RaTG13 to scientific attention in January 2020. Other possible backbones could, as well, still wait for publication.

Andersen et al.^[2] affirm that “the acquisition of both the polybasic cleavage site and predicted O-linked glycans also argues against culture-based scenarios.” Methods for insertion of a polybasic cleavage site in infectious bronchitis CoV are given in Cheng et al.^[54] and resulted in increased pathogenicity. Concerning the predicted O-linked glycans around the newly inserted polybasic site, it should be noted that this prediction was not confirmed by Cryo-EM inquiry into the SARS-CoV-2 spike glycoprotein.^[55] Nevertheless, while it is true that O-linked glycans are much more likely to arise under immune selection, they could be added in the lab through site-directed mutagenesis^[56] or arise in the course of *in vivo* experiments, for example, in BLT-L mice with human lung implants and autologous human immune system^[57] or in mice expressing the hACE2 receptor.^[13] To overcome problems of bat CoV isolation, experiments based on direct inoculation of bat CoV in suckling rats have been carried out.^[58] Humanized mice, ferrets,

primates and/or other animals with similar ACE2 conformation could have all been used for serial passage experiments, as described in detail by Sirotkin and Sirotkin.^[1]

Andersen et al.^[2] also state that “subsequent generation of a polybasic cleavage site would have then required repeated passage in cell culture or animals with ACE2 receptors similar to those of humans, but such work has also not previously been described.” It should not be excluded that such experiments could have been aborted due to the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak, before a possible publication of the results or that the results were never intended to be published.

It is important to mention that RaTG13 and the pangolin CoV sequences from smuggled pangolins confiscated in the GD province in March 2019, and to which most of published papers supporting a natural origin of SARS-CoV-2 refer,^[2] have recently been questioned as to the accuracy of their assembly data^{xii} and require further analyses to prove their correctness.^[xiii, xiv] It should also be noted that *in vitro* receptor binding studies of reconstituted RaTG13 yielded some peculiar results.^[xv] The most surprising observation was that RaTG13, unlike SARS-CoV-2, is unable to bind ACE2 in *R. macrotis* bats, a close relative of RaTG13's purported host, *R. affinis*^[59] (whose ACE2 receptor has not yet been tested). At the same time, RaTG13 was observed to bind hACE2^[60], but not as well as ACE2 of rats and mice, to which SARS-CoV-2 did not bind at all. Is it possible that just as SARS-MAL5 was a mouse-adapted strain of SARS, RaTG13 is actually a mouse-adapted version of a CoV extracted from the Mojiang cave, rather than a strain obtained from a bat fecal swab? Unfortunately, the RaTG13 sample has been exhausted and it is no longer available for external examination,^[11] which is unfortunate given a number of inconsistencies in its sequencing raw data. Also, the status and availability of the Mojiang miners' samples remain as well an open and highly relevant question. Several samples from the miners have been collected^[7, 8] and likely stored, and it would be of great value to test them for the presence of SARS-CoV-2-like CoVs.

Another open question is the reason for modification and subsequent deletion of WIV's own viral database. In May 2020, several media outlets have reported that the change tracking system of WIV's internal database showed that the database was renamed from “Wildlife-borne viral pathogen database” to “Bat and rodent-borne viral pathogen database,” and its description was edited to replace instances of “wild animal” by “bat and rodent”; in addition, mention of “arthropod vectors” was deleted.^{xv} The database description reported that it contained over 60 Mb of data in structured query language (SQL) format, but as of early May 2020 the download link no longer worked.^{xvi} Subsequently, the database page was taken down in its entirety but its snapshot is still available on Web Archive.^{xvii} It is possible that other international CoV labs

might have downloaded the SQL archive of the WIV database before it was taken down, in which case such groups should make those data publicly available.

HOW COULD THE VIRUS HAVE ESCAPED FROM A LAB?

The leak of highly dangerous pathogens from laboratories is not a rare event and occurrences have been documented in several countries. The most notable lab leak known is the 1977 H1N1 lab escape from China that caused a worldwide pandemic.^[61] The most recent one is the November 2019 outbreak of brucellosis that occurred in two research centers in Lanzhou, China, infecting over 100 students and staff members.^[62] Several lab escapes of the first SARS virus have been reported as well: in the summer of 2003 in Singapore,^[63] then in December 2003 in Taiwan,^{xviii} and in the spring of 2004 twice in China.^{xix}

Concerns about WIV's lab safety were raised in 2018 by U.S. Embassy officials after visiting the Institute and having an interview with Zhengli Shi. The lab auditors summarized their worries in subsequent diplomatic cables to Washington.^{xx} Chinese experts have also raised concerns about lab safety in their own country, lamenting that “lab trash can contain man-made viruses, bacteria or microbes” and that “some researchers discharge laboratory materials into the sewer after experiments without a specific biological disposal mechanism.”^{xxi}

American labs have also had their share of safety issues. Recently, research operations in the Biosafety level (BSL)-4 United States Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID) facility in Fort Detrick were interrupted in August 2019 following safety violations, in particular, relating to the disposal of infective materials.^{xxii} Other US labs have been cited for safety issues as well.^{22]}

A number of scenarios causing SARS-CoV-2 to leak from a lab can be hypothesized. For example, an infected animal could have escaped from a lab or it could have scratched or bitten a worker (a concern raised in 2017 about the establishment of a BSL-4 primate vaccine testing facility in Kunming, Yunnan^[64]), or a researcher could have accidentally stuck themselves with inoculate (as happened in two cases in Russia^{xxiii}). Until 2020, CoVs were not considered particularly deadly or virulent. SARS-like CoVs did not require BSL-4 and could be manipulated under BSL-2 and BSL-3^[42] conditions, making an accidental leak more likely. Aerosol experiments with CoVs^[65] could result in lab leak as well, because a failure in the equipment used could go unnoticed for a long time before infection of lab workers is detected. Finally, the virus

could potentially have leaked through the sewage system if proper waste disposal and/or decontamination procedures were not followed.

CONCLUSIONS AND OUTLOOK

On the basis of our analysis, an artificial origin of SARS-CoV-2 is not a baseless conspiracy theory that is to be condemned^[66] and researchers have the responsibility to consider all possible causes for SARS-CoV-2 emergence. The insertion of human-adapted pangolin CoV RBD obtained by cell/animal serial passage and furin cleavage site could arise from site-directed mutagenesis experiments, in a context of evolutionary studies or development of pan-CoV vaccines or drugs. A recent article in Nature^[67] affirms that a laboratory origin for SARS-CoV-2 cannot be ruled out, as researchers could have been infected accidentally, and that gain-of-function experiments resulting in SARS-CoV-2 could have been performed at WIV. Genetic manipulation of SARS-CoV-2 may have been carried out in any laboratory in the world with access to the backbone sequence and the necessary equipment and it would not leave any trace. Modern technologies based on synthetic genetics platforms allow the reconstruction of viruses based on their genomic sequence, without the need of a natural isolate.^[68]

A thorough investigation on strain collections and research records in all laboratories involved in CoV research before SARS-CoV-2 outbreak is urgently needed. Special attention should be paid to strains of CoVs that were generated in virology laboratories but have not yet been published, as those possibly described in the deleted WIV database. Because finding a possible natural host could take years, as with the first SARS,^[67] or never succeed, equal priority should be given to investigating natural and laboratory origins of SARS-CoV-2.

Xiao Qiang, a research scientist at Berkeley, recently stated: "To understand exactly how this virus has originated is critical knowledge for preventing this from happening in the future."^[xxv]

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are very grateful to Prof. Allan Krill (NTNU) for proof reading the manuscript, all the valuable comments and being open-minded about controversial hypotheses; Prof. Heribert Insam (Head of the Department of Microbiology; University of Innsbruck) for his support and Dr. Lawrence Sellin for all the useful information. A special thanks goes to Dr. Fernando Castro-Chavez (former Post-Doc at the New York Medical College) for his support with Research Gate. We are very thankful to René Bergelt, for having discovered the database that confirmed our finding that BtCoV4991 and RaTG13 refer to the same sample. Finally, we are

extremely grateful to members of the D.R.A.S.T.I.C. (Decentralised Radical Autonomous Search Team Investigating COVID-19) Twitter group for all their work in uncovering many previously unpublished facts about SARS-CoV-2 and its relative strains. In particular, we are grateful to Luigi Warren for continuously probing the possible connection of the 2012 Mojiang pneumonia outbreak to WIV and SARS-CoV-2, to @TheSeeker268 for finding Chinese-language 2013 Xu MSc and 2016 Huang PhD theses, which have confirmed the SARS-like viral nature of the 2012 Mojiang pneumonia outbreak and have elucidated WIV's role in investigating that outbreak,xxiv including WIV's collection of the 4991/RaTG13 strain from the Mojiang mine, and to Francisco de Asis de Ribera Martin for providing us the English translation of the two theses, and also discovering the RaTG13 amplicon dates.

(b)(6)



PROBLEMS & PARADIGMS

Prospects & Overviews

The genetic structure of SARS-CoV-2 does not rule out a laboratory origin

SARS-COV-2 chimeric structure and furin cleavage site might be the result of genetic manipulation

Rossana Segreto¹ | Yuri Deigin²¹ Department of Microbiology, University of Innsbruck, Innsbruck, Austria² Youthereum Genetics Inc., Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Correspondence

Rossana Segreto, Department of Microbiology, University of Innsbruck, Technikerstraße 25, 6020 Innsbruck, Austria.
Email: Rossana.Segreto@uibk.ac.at

No external funding was received for this work.

Rossana Segreto and Yuri Deigin contributed equally to this study.

Abstract

Severe acute respiratory syndrome-coronavirus (SARS-CoV)-2's origin is still controversial. Genomic analyses show SARS-CoV-2 likely to be chimeric, most of its sequence closest to bat CoV RaTG13, whereas its receptor binding domain (RBD) is almost identical to that of a pangolin CoV. Chimeric viruses can arise *via* natural recombination or human intervention. The furin cleavage site in the spike protein of SARS-CoV-2 confers to the virus the ability to cross species and tissue barriers, but was previously unseen in other SARS-like CoVs. Might genetic manipulations have been performed in order to evaluate pangolins as possible intermediate hosts for bat-derived CoVs that were originally unable to bind to human receptors? Both cleavage site and specific RBD could result from site-directed mutagenesis, a procedure that does not leave a trace. Considering the devastating impact of SARS-CoV-2 and importance of preventing future pandemics, researchers have a responsibility to carry out a thorough analysis of all possible SARS-CoV-2 origins.

KEYWORDS

BtCov/4991, furin cleavage site, Gain-of-function studies, pangolin CoV, RaTG13, receptor binding domain, SARS-CoV-2

INTRODUCTION

Nearly a year has passed since the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome-coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) in Wuhan, China, and its origin is still controversial. Despite the international research effort conducted, a natural host, either direct or intermediate, has not yet been identified. The hypothesis that the Wuhan Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market was the first source for animal-human virus transmis-

sion has now been conclusively dismissedⁱ and the few market samples that were collected showed only human-adapted SARS-CoV-2, with no traces of zoonotic predecessor strainsⁱⁱ. Almost all scientific papers published to date purport that SARS-CoV-2 has a natural origin, and the only published paper considering possible a lab origin^[1] focuses on serial passage as the technique that could justify SARS-CoV-2 special

ⁱ Aredy, J. T. (2020). China rules out animal market and lab as coronavirus origin. *The Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-rules-out-animal-market-and-lab-as-coronavirus-origin-11590517508> (last accessed on Oct 15, 2020).

ⁱⁱ Zhan, S. H., Deverman, B. E., Chan, Y. A. (2020). SARS-CoV-2 is well adapted for humans. What does this mean for re-emergence? *BioRxiv*. <https://doi.org/10.1101/2020.05.01.073262> (last accessed on Oct 15, 2020).

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2020 The Authors. *BioEssays* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC

adaptation. ¹³ There are three additional main SARS-CoV-2 features, (1) the presence of a furin cleavage site missing in other CoVs of the same group and (2) an receptor binding domain (RBD) optimized to bind to human cells²¹ might be the result of lab manipulation techniques such as site-directed mutagenesis. The acquisition of both unique features by SARS-CoV-2 more or less simultaneously is less likely to be natural or caused only by cell/animal serial passage.

SARS-COV-2'S CLOSEST RELATIVES ARE BAT AND PANGOLIN CORONAVIRUSES

Zhou et al.¹³ from the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) were the first to identify and characterize a new coronavirus (CoV), SARS-CoV-2. The genomic sequences obtained from early cases shared 79% sequence identity to the CoVs that caused severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS-CoV) in 2002–2003 and 96.2% sequence identity to RaTG13 (MN996532), a CoV sequence detected from a *Rhinolophus affinis* bat. RaTG13 is currently the closest phylogenetic relative for SARS-CoV-2 found,¹⁴ but its complete genomic sequence was not published before the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2 and the original sample was collected in the Yunnan province (China) by the same group of WIV researchers in 2013. Zhou et al.¹³ stated to have found a match between SARS-CoV-2 and a short region of RNA-dependent RNA polymerase (RdRp) of a CoV in their database and then fully sequenced the original sample collected in 2013, which they called RaTG13.

We discovered that the RdRp of RaTG13 has 100% nucleotide identity with the sequence BtCoV/4991 (KP876546), which was identified by Ge et al.¹⁵ in a *Rhinolophus affinis* bat in the Yunnan province in 2013, same location and year as RaTG13. BtCoV/4991 was collected in a mine colonized by bats near Tongguanzen, Mojiang, Yunnan. The WIV researchers were invited to investigate the mine after six miners there had contracted severe pneumonia in 2012ⁱⁱⁱ, and three of the miners have died.¹⁶ The miners have been tasked with clearing out bat droppings in the mine, and the severity of their pneumonia correlated with the duration of exposure to the mine.¹⁷ Four miners' samples subsequently underwent testing at WIV, where Immunoglobulin G (IgG) antibodies against SARS were identified in all samples.¹⁸ Considering that only about 5300 people were infected in mainland China during the SARS outbreak of 2002–2004, most of whom resided in Guangdong, the odds of four miners in Yunnan retaining antibodies from the 2002–2004 SARS outbreak are negligible. On the other hand, it is possible that the SARS antibody test administered to the miners cross-reacted with a novel SARS-like bat virus that the miners had acquired at the mine. Ge et al.¹⁵ have identified a number of CoVs in the mine, but based on the phylogenetic analysis, BtCoV/4991 was the only SARS-related strain, clearly separated from all known alpha- and beta-CoVs at that time. BtCoV/4991 was also different from other bat CoVs in the phylogenetic analysis carried out by Wang et al. in

2019.¹⁹ BtCoV/4991 identified as the closest sequence to SARS-CoV-2 because RaTG13 had not yet been published at that time. BtCoV/4991 and RaTG13 have been later asserted to be two different coding names of the same strain, as their original authors at WIV registered the two strains as one entry in the Database of Bat-associated Viruses (DBatVir).¹⁴

In late July 2020, Zhengli Shi, the leading CoV researcher from WIV, in an email interview¹¹ asserted the renaming of the RaTG13 sample and unexpectedly declared that the full sequencing of RaTG13 has been carried out as far back as in 2018 and not after the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak, as stated in Zhou et al.¹³ The reversal in WIV's stance on when exactly RaTG13 was fully sequenced could have been due to the discovery by independent researchers into the origins of SARS-CoV-2 that the filenames of the raw sequencing reads deposited by WIV on May 19, 2020^v seem to indicate that sequencing for RaTG13 was done in 2017 and 2018.^{vi} However, no formal erratum about year of sequencing and sample renaming from the authors of Zhou et al.¹³ has yet appeared, or as far as is currently known, has been submitted.

The second non-human RdRp sequence closest to BtCoV/4991 (91.89% nucleotide identity) is the CoV sequence MP789 (MT084071) isolated in 2019 in a Malaysian pangolin (*Manis javanica*) from the Guangdong province (GD), China.¹²¹ The envelope protein of MP789 shows surprisingly 100% aminoacidic identity with the corresponding protein in RaTG13, in bat-SL-CoVZXC21 (MG772934.1), in bat-SL-CoVZC45 (MG772933.1) and in some early SARS-CoV-2 isolates (e.g. YP_009724392).¹²³ The envelope protein of CoVs is involved in critical aspects of the viral lifecycle, such as viral entry, replication and pathogenesis.¹²⁴

BAT COVS HAVE BEEN THOROUGHLY STUDIED AND GENETICALLY MANIPULATED

Many studies have reported that bats are natural reservoirs for a broad diversity of potentially pathogenic SARS-like CoVs.^{15,16} Some of these viruses can potentially directly infect humans¹⁷, whereas others need to mutate their spike protein in order to effectively bind to the human angiotensin 1-converting enzyme 2 (hACE2) receptor and mediate virus entry.¹⁸ In order to evaluate the emergence potential of novel CoVs, researchers have created a number of chimeric CoVs, consisting of bat CoV backbones, normally unable to infect human cells, whose spike proteins were replaced by those from CoVs compatible with human ACE2. These chimeras were meant to simulate recombination events that might occur in nature.^{19,20} Such gain-of-function experiments have raised a number of biosafety concerns and stirred controversy among researchers and the general public. One of the main arguments in favor of gain-of-function studies is the need to be prepared with an arsenal of drugs and vaccines for the next pandemic.²¹

^{iv} DBatVir – The Database of Bat-Associated Viruses. <http://www.mgc.ac.cn/cgi-bin/DBatVir/main.cgi?func=accession&acc=MN996532> (last accessed on Oct 15, 2020).

^v SRX8357956: amplicon sequences of RaTG13. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/sra/SRX8357956> (last accessed on Oct 15, 2020).

^{vi} Anon. (2020). Names of the RaTG13 amplicon sequences. <https://web.archive.org/web/20200918174030/https://graph.org/RaTG13-Amplicon-Names-07-03> (last accessed on Oct 15, 2020).

ⁱⁱⁱ Qiu, J. (2020). How China's 'Bat Woman' hunted down viruses from SARS to the new coronavirus. *Sci. Am.* <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-chinas-bat-woman-hunted-down-viruses-from-sars-to-the-new-coronavirus/> (last accessed on Oct 15, 2020).

By contrast, the 2015–2016 document A-00000565040 at the next pandemic itself could be caused by those experiments, due to the risk of lab escape.^[22,23]

In recent years, the field of corona-virology had been focused on pan-CoV therapies and vaccines, as evident from research conducted in the past 5 years,^[24–27] as well as from media reports.^{vii} Synthetically generating diverse panels of potential pre-emergent CoVs was declared a goal of active grants for the EcoHealth Alliance, which funded some of such research at WIV, in collaboration with laboratories in the USA and other international partners.^{viii}

CREATING CHIMERIC COVS WITH NOVEL RBDS HAS GONE ON FOR DECADES

Researchers have been generating chimeric CoVs for over two decades, long before the advent of modern sequencing or genetic engineering techniques. For example, in 1999, a group from Utrecht University used targeted RNA recombination to create a “cat-and-mouse” CoV chimera: the RBDs of a feline and murine CoV were swapped, demonstrating that this exchange swapped also species tropism during *in vitro* experiments.^[28]

In 2007, the Shi group at WIV created a series of “bat-man” CoV chimeric spike proteins while trying to determine what exactly confers CoVs the ability to jump from one species to another. The researchers used different segments of the spike protein of the human SARS virus to replace corresponding segments in the spike protein of a bat viral backbone. It was concluded that a relatively short region (aa 310 to 518) of the spike protein “was necessary and sufficient to convert Rp3-S into a huACE2-binding molecule,”²⁹ that is to provide the bat CoV spike protein with a novel ability of binding to a human ACE2 receptor.

In 2008, the Baric group at the University of North Carolina (UNC) took the WIV research one step further: instead of using human immunodeficiency viruses (HIV) pseudo-viruses with bat CoV spike proteins, a live chimeric CoV was created. Following the experiments of their 2007 WIV colleagues, the Baric group used a bat SARS-like CoV as a backbone and replaced its RBD with the RBD from human SARS.^[30]

In 2015, the Shi and Baric groups joined forces and published probably the most famous gain-of-function virology paper, which described the creation of another synthetic chimeric virus.^[19] This time the RBD of a mouse-adapted SARS backbone (SARS-MA15) was replaced by the RBD of RsSHC014, a bat strain previously isolated from Yunnan bats in 2011 by the Shi group. In 2016, the Baric group repeated their 2015 experiment using the same SARS-MA15 backbone and the RBD from Rs3367,^[31] a close relative of RsSHC014 also previously found in Yunnan by WIV and renamed “WIV1” after live culturing.^[17]

Probably the largest reported number of novel chimeric viruses created was described in a 2017 paper from the Shi group at WIV,^[15] in

which the Shi group reported creating 266 chimeric viruses using WIV1 as a backbone and transplanting into it various RBDs from bat SARS-like viruses. These viruses were collected over a span of 5 years from the same cave near Kunming, Yunnan Province, where the Shi group originally found Rs3367 and RsSHC014. Only two of the eight live chimeric viruses were successfully rescued, and those two strains were found to possess the ability to bind to the human ACE2 receptor, as confirmed by experiments in hACE2-expressing HeLa cells and RT-PCR quantification of viral RNA.

SARS-COV-2 SHARES ITS RBD WITH A PANGOLIN COV

The possibility that pangolins could be the intermediate host for SARS-CoV-2 has long been under discussion.^[32–34] The biggest divergence between SARS-CoV-2 and RaTG13 is observed in the RBD of their spike proteins.^[4] Although its overall genome similarity is lower to SARS-CoV-2 than that of RaTG13, the MP789 pangolin strain isolated from GD pangolins has an almost identical RBD to that of SARS-CoV-2. Indeed, pangolin CoVs and SARS-CoV-2 possess identical amino acids at the five critical residues of the RBD, whereas RaTG13 only shares one amino acid with SARS-CoV-2.^[35] ACE2 sequence similarity is higher between humans and pangolins than between humans and bats. Intriguingly, the spike protein of SARS-CoV-2 has a higher predicted binding affinity to human ACE2 receptor than to that of pangolins and bats.^{ix} Before the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak, pangolins were the only mammals other than bats documented to carry and be infected by SARS-CoV-2 related CoV.^[12] Recombination events between the RBD of CoV from pangolins and RaTG13-like backbone could have produced SARS-CoV-2 as chimeric strain. For such recombination to occur naturally, the two viruses must have infected the same cell in the same organism simultaneously, a rather improbable event considering the low population density of pangolins and the scarce presence of CoVs in their natural populations.* Moreover, receptor binding studies of reconstituted RaTG13 showed that it does not bind to pangolin ACE2.^{xi}

THE FURIN CLEAVAGE SITE: THE KEY DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SARS-COV-2 AND ITS CLOSEST RELATIVE RATG13

SARS-CoV-2 differs from its closest relative RaTG13 by a few key characteristics. The most striking difference is the acquisition in the

^{vii} Kahn, J. (2020). How scientists could stop the next pandemic before it starts. *NYT Magazine*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/21/magazine/pandemic-vaccine.html> (last accessed on Oct 15, 2020).

^{viii} Project Number 2R01AI110964-06, ECOHEALTH ALLIANCE, INC., https://projectreporter.nih.gov/project_info_description.cfm?aid=9819304&icde=49645421&ddparam=&ddvalue=&ddsub=&cr=1&csb=default&cs=ASC&pball= (last accessed on Oct 15, 2020).

^{ix} Piplani, S., Singh, P. K., Winkler, D. A., Petrovsky, N. (2020). In silico comparison of spike protein-ACE2 binding affinities across species; significance for the possible origin of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. *arXiv*. <http://arxiv.org/abs/2005.06199> (last accessed on Oct 15, 2020).

^x Lee, J., Hughes, T., Lee, M.-H., Field, H., Rovie-Ryan, J. J., Sitam, F. T., ... Daszak, R. (2020). No evidence of coronaviruses or other potentially zoonotic viruses in Sunda pangolins (*Manis javanica*) entering the wildlife trade via Malaysia. *BioRxiv*. <https://doi.org/10.1101/2020.06.19.158717> (last accessed on Oct 15, 2020).

^{xi} Mou, H., Quinlan, B. D., Peng, H., Guo, Y., Peng, S., Zhang, L., ... Farzan, M. (2020). Mutations from bat ACE2 orthologs markedly enhance ACE2-Fc neutralization of SARS-CoV-2. *BioRxiv*. <https://doi.org/10.1101/2020.06.29.178459> (last accessed on Oct 15, 2020).

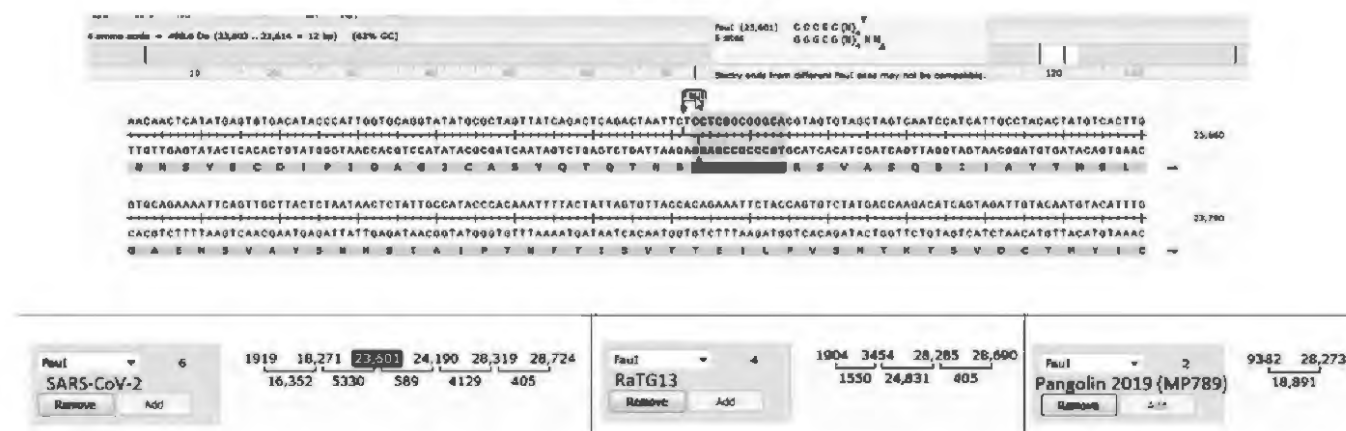


FIGURE 1 Nucleotide sequence of the S protein at the S1/S2 junction in SARS-CoV-2 (NC045512.2) showing the furin cleavage site (in blue) that includes a *FauI* enzyme restriction site

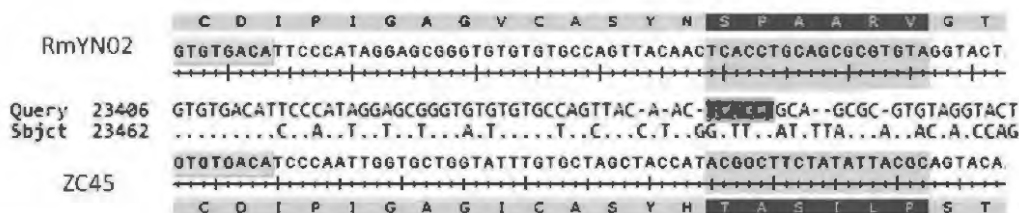


FIGURE 2 Alignment of nucleotide and amino acid sequences of the S protein from bat-SL-CoVZC45 (MG772933.1) and RmYN02 at the S1/S2 junction site. No insertions of nucleotides possibly evolving in a furin cleavage site can be observed (in blue)

spike protein of SARS-CoV-2 of a cleavage site activated by a host-cell enzyme furin, previously not identified in other beta-CoVs of lineage b^[36] and similar to that of Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) coronavirus.^[35] Host protease processing plays a pivotal role as a species and tissue barrier and engineering of the cleavage sites of CoV spike proteins modifies virus tropism and virulence.^[37] The ubiquitous expression of furin in different organs and tissues have conferred to SARS-CoV-2 the ability to infect organs usually invulnerable to other CoVs, leading to systemic infection in the body.^[38] Cell-cultured SARS-CoV-2 that was missing the above-mentioned cleavage site caused attenuated symptoms in infected hamsters,^[39] and mutagenesis studies have confirmed that the polybasic furin site is essential for SARS-CoV-2's ability to infect human lung cells.^[40]

The polybasic furin site in SARS-CoV-2 was created by a 12-nucleotide insert TCCTCGGCGGGC coding for a PRRA amino acid sequence at the S1/S2 junction (Figure 1). Interestingly, the two joint arginines are coded by two CGGCGG codons, which are rare for these viruses: only 5% of arginines are coded by CGG in SARS-CoV-2 or RaTG13, and CGGCGG in the new insert is the only doubled instance of this codon in SARS-CoV-2. The CGGCGG insert includes a *FauI* restriction site, of which there are six instances in SARS-CoV-2 and four instances in RaTG13 (and two in MP789). The serendipitous location of the *FauI* site could allow using restriction fragment length polymor-

phism (RFLP) techniques^[41] for cloning^[42] or screening for mutations,^[43] as the new furin site is prone to deletions *in vitro*.^[39,44]

A study by Zhou et al.^[45] reported the discovery of a novel CoV strain RmYN02, which the authors claim exhibits natural PAA amino acid insertions at the S1/S2 cleavage site where SARS-CoV-2 has the PRRA insertion. However, upon close examination of the underlying nucleotide sequence of RmYN02 in comparison with its closest ancestors bat-SL-CoVZC45 and bat-SL-CoVZXC21, no insertions are apparent, just nucleotide mutations (Figure 2).

Therefore, SARS-CoV-2 remains unique among its beta CoV relatives not only due to a polybasic furin site at the S1/S2 junction, but also due to the four amino acid insert PRRA that had created it. The insertion causes a split in the original codon for serine (TCA) in MP789 or RaTG13 to give part of a new codon for serine (TCT) and part of the amino acid alanine (GCA) in SARS-CoV-2 (Figure 3).

The insertion of the furin cleavage site in SARS-CoV-2 is not in frame with the rest of the sequence, when compared with the MP789 and the RaTG13 sequences (Figure 3). Therefore, it is possible to exclude that such insertion could have originated by polymerase slippage or by releasing and repriming, because insertion mutations generated by these mechanisms have been postulated to maintain the reading frame of the viral sequence.^[46] The possibility that the furin cleavage site could have been acquired by recombination has been recently

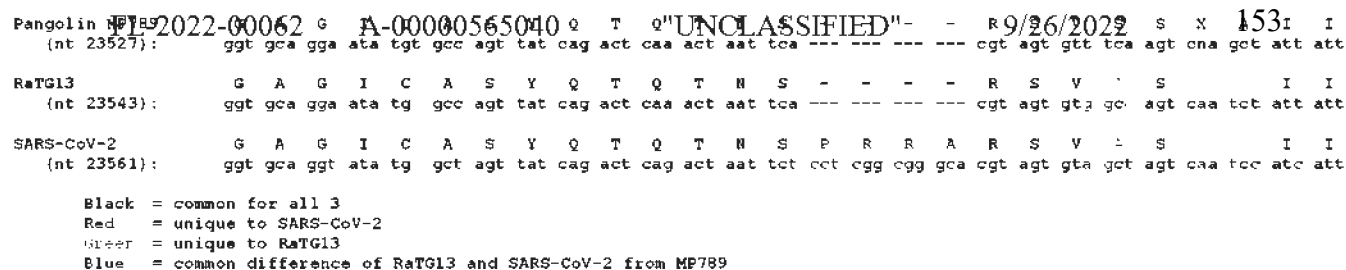


FIGURE 3 Alignment of nucleotide and amino acid sequences of the S protein from RaTG13 (MN996532), MP789 (MT084071) and SARS-CoV-2 (NC045512.2) at the S1/S2 site. The common nucleotides and amino acids are given in black, SARS-CoV-2 unique nucleotides and amino acids in red, RaTG13 unique nucleotides and amino acids in green and common nucleotides and amino acids in SARS-CoV-2 and RaTG13 that differ in MP789 in blue. The codon forserine (TCA) in RaTG13 and MP789 is split in SARS-CoV-2 to give part of a new codon forserine (TCT) and part of the amino acidalanine (GCA)

questioned by Seyran et al.^[47] because the SARS-CoV-2 spike protein seems to lack any further recombination event in contrast with the recombination model of other CoVs.

CRITIQUE OF "THE PROXIMAL ORIGIN OF SARS-COV-2"

Due to the broad-spectrum of research conducted over almost 20 years on bat SARS-CoVs justified by their potential to spill over from animal to human,^[48] a possible synthetic origin by laboratory engineering of SARS-CoV-2 cannot be excluded. The widely cited article of Andersen et al.^[2] stated that SARS-CoV-2 has most likely a natural origin. The main argument brought by the authors is that the high-affinity binding of the SARS-CoV-2 spike protein to hACE2 could not have been predicted by models based on the RBD of SARS-CoV. Based on the structural analysis conducted by Wan et al.,^[49] SARS-CoV-2 has the potential to recognize hACE2 more efficiently than the SARS-CoV, which emerged in 2002. Moreover, generation of CoV chimeric strains has recently demonstrated that bat CoV spikes can bind to the hACE2 receptor with more plasticity than previously predicted.^[15] All amino acids in the RBD have been extensively analyzed and new models to predict ACE2 affinity are available.^[50] In this regard, BatCoV Rs3367 (99.9% identity to WIV1) has been shown to share with SARS-CoV-2 four out of six critical residues in the RBD. Considering that WIV1 was shown to directly bind to hACE2, the same assumption could easily have been made about SARS-CoV-2 RBD.^[51]

As described above, creation of chimeric viruses has been carried out over the years with the purpose of studying the potential pathogenicity of bat CoVs for humans. In this context, SARS-CoV-2 could have been synthesized by combining a backbone similar to RaTG13 with the RBD of CoV similar to the one recently isolated from pangolins^[12], because the latter is characterized by a higher affinity with the hACE2 receptor. Such research could have aimed to identify pangolins as possible intermediate hosts for bat-CoV potentially pathogenic for humans. Subsequent serial cell or animal passage, as described by Sirotkin & Sirotkin^[1] could have provided the perfect adaptation of the RBD to the hACE2.

Regarding the furin cleavage site, Andersen et al.^[2] state that "the functional consequence of the polybasic cleavage site in SARS-CoV-2 is unknown." New studies from several groups have lately identified this activation site as possibly enabling the virus to spread efficiently between humans and attack multiple organs.^[52] Experiments on proteolytic cleavage of CoV spike proteins have been recently suggested as future key studies to understand virus transmissibility in different hosts.^[50]

Andersen et al.^[2] also state, based on the work of Almazan et al.^[53] that "the genetic data irrefutably show that SARS-CoV-2 is not derived from any previously used virus backbone." In the last 6 years before the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2 the number of potential bat backbones has been undeniably increased by several bat CoV screenings, last but not least bringing RaTG13 to scientific attention in January 2020. Other possible backbones could, as well, still wait for publication.

Andersen et al.^[2] affirm that "the acquisition of both the polybasic cleavage site and predicted O-linked glycans also argues against culture-based scenarios." Methods for insertion of a polybasic cleavage site in infectious bronchitis CoV are given in Cheng et al.^[54] and resulted in increased pathogenicity. Concerning the predicted O-linked glycans around the newly inserted polybasic site, it should be noted that this prediction was not confirmed by Cryo-EM inquiry into the SARS-CoV-2 spike glycoprotein.^[55] Nevertheless, while it is true that O-linked glycans are much more likely to arise under immune selection, they could be added in the lab through site-directed mutagenesis^[56] or arise in the course of *in vivo* experiments, for example, in BLT-L mice with human lung implants and autologous human immune system^[57] or in mice expressing the hACE2 receptor.^[31] To overcome problems of bat CoV isolation, experiments based on direct inoculation of bat CoV in suckling rats have been carried out.^[58] Humanized mice, ferrets, primates and/or other animals with similar ACE2 conformation could have all been used for serial passage experiments, as described in detail by Sirotkin and Sirotkin.^[1]

Andersen et al.^[2] also state that "subsequent generation of a polybasic cleavage site would have then required repeated passage in cell culture or animals with ACE2 receptors similar to those of humans, but such work has also not previously been described." It should not be excluded that such experiments could have been aborted due to the

SARS-CoV-2 (2020-00062) a possible 00000565040 "UNHOW COULD THE VIRUS HAVE ESCAPED FROM A LAB?"

It is important to mention that RaTG13 and the pangolin CoV sequences from smuggled pangolins confiscated in the GD province in March 2019, and to which most of published papers supporting a natural origin of SARS-CoV-2 refer,^[2] have recently been questioned as to the accuracy of their assembly data^{xii} and require further analyses to prove their correctness.^[xiii, xiv] It should also be noted that *in vitro* receptor binding studies of reconstituted RaTG13 yielded some peculiar results.^[xi] The most surprising observation was that RaTG13, unlike SARS-CoV-2, is unable to bind ACE2 in *R. macrotis* bats, a close relative of RaTG13's purported host, *R. affinis*^[59] (whose ACE2 receptor has not yet been tested). At the same time, RaTG13 was observed to bind hACE2^[60], but not as well as ACE2 of rats and mice, to which SARS-CoV-2 did not bind at all. Is it possible that just as SARS-M415 was a mouse-adapted strain of SARS, RaTG13 is actually a mouse-adapted version of a CoV extracted from the Mojiang cave, rather than a strain obtained from a bat fecal swab? Unfortunately, the RaTG13 sample has been exhausted and it is no longer available for external examination,^[11] which is unfortunate given a number of inconsistencies in its sequencing raw data. Also, the status and availability of the Mojiang miners' samples remain as well an open and highly relevant question. Several samples from the miners have been collected^[7,8] and likely stored, and it would be of great value to test them for the presence of SARS-CoV-2-like CoVs.

Another open question is the reason for modification and subsequent deletion of WIV's own viral database. In May 2020, several media outlets have reported that the change tracking system of WIV's internal database showed that the database was renamed from "Wildlife-borne viral pathogen database" to "Bat and rodent-borne viral pathogen database," and its description was edited to replace instances of "wild animal" by "bat and rodent"; in addition, mention of "arthropod vectors" was deleted.^{xv} The database description reported that it contained over 60 Mb of data in structured query language (SQL) format, but as of early May 2020 the download link no longer worked.^{xvi} Subsequently, the database page was taken down in its entirety but its snapshot is still available on Web Archive.^{xvii} It is possible that other international CoV labs might have downloaded the SQL archive of the WIV database before it was taken down, in which case such groups should make those data publicly available.

The leak of highly dangerous pathogens from laboratories is not a rare event and occurrences have been documented in several countries. The most notable lab leak known is the 1977 H1N1 lab escape from China that caused a worldwide pandemic.^[61] The most recent one is the November 2019 outbreak of brucellosis that occurred in two research centers in Lanzhou, China, infecting over 100 students and staff members.^[62] Several lab escapes of the first SARS virus have been reported as well: in the summer of 2003 in Singapore,^[63] then in December 2003 in Taiwan,^{xviii} and in the spring of 2004 twice in China.^{xix}

Concerns about WIV's lab safety were raised in 2018 by U.S. Embassy officials after visiting the Institute and having an interview with Zhengli Shi. The lab auditors summarized their worries in subsequent diplomatic cables to Washington.^{xx} Chinese experts have also raised concerns about lab safety in their own country, lamenting that "lab trash can contain man-made viruses, bacteria or microbes" and that "some researchers discharge laboratory materials into the sewer after experiments without a specific biological disposal mechanism."^{xxi}

American labs have also had their share of safety issues. Recently, research operations in the Biosafety level (BSL)-4 United States Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID) facility in Fort Detrick were interrupted in August 2019 following safety violations, in particular, relating to the disposal of infective materials.^{xxii} Other US labs have been cited for safety issues as well.^[22]

A number of scenarios causing SARS-CoV-2 to leak from a lab can be hypothesized. For example, an infected animal could have escaped from a lab or it could have scratched or bitten a worker (a concern raised in 2017 about the establishment of a BSL-4 primate vaccine testing facility in Kunming, Yunnan^[64]), or a researcher could have accidentally stuck themselves with inoculate (as happened in two cases in Russia^{xxiii}). Until 2020, CoVs were not considered particularly deadly or virulent. SARS-like CoVs did not require BSL-4 and could be manipulated under BSL-2 and BSL-3^[42] conditions, making an accidental leak more likely. Aerosol experiments with CoVs^[65] could result in lab leak as well, because a failure in the equipment used could go unnoticed for a long time before infection of lab workers is detected. Finally, the virus

^{xii} Zhang, D. (2020). Anomalies in BatCoV/RaTG13 sequencing and provenance. *Zenodo*. <https://zenodo.org/record/3969272> (last accessed on Oct 15, 2020).

^{xiii} Singla, M., Ahmad, S., Gupta, C., Sethi, T. (2020). De novo assembly of RaTG13 genome reveals inconsistencies further obscuring SARS-CoV-2 origins. *Preprints*. <https://doi.org/10.20944/preprints202008.0595.v1> (last accessed on Oct 12, 2020).

^{xiv} Chan, Y. A., Zhan, S. H. (2020). Single source of pangolin CoVs with a near identical spike RBD to SARS-CoV-2. *BioRxiv*. <https://doi.org/10.1101/2020.07.07.184374> (last accessed on Oct 15, 2020).

^{xv} Devine, M. (2020). What is China covering up about the coronavirus? *NYT Magazine*. <https://nypost.com/2020/05/06/what-is-china-covering-up-about-the-coronavirus-devine/> (last accessed on Oct 12, 2020).

^{xvi} <https://twitter.com/ydeigin/status/1259891518468427776> (last accessed on Oct 15, 2020).

^{xvii} Bat and rodent-borne viral pathogen database. <https://web.archive.org/web/20200529174243/http://csdata.org/p/308/> (last accessed on Oct 15, 2020).

^{xviii} Reuters (2003). SARS case confirmed in Taiwan. *Wired*. <https://www.wired.com/2003/12/sars-case-confirmed-in-taiwan/> (last accessed on Oct 13, 2020).

^{xix} Walgate, R. (2004). SARS escaped Beijing lab twice. *The Scientist Magazine*. <https://www.the-scientist.com/news-analysis/sars-escaped-beijing-lab-twice-50137> (last accessed on Oct 15, 2020).

^{xx} Rogin, J. (2020). State Department cables warned of safety issues at Wuhan lab studying bat coronaviruses. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/04/14/state-department-cables-warned-safety-issues-wuhan-lab-studying-bat-coronaviruses/> (last accessed on Oct 15, 2020).

^{xxi} Caiyu, L., Shumei, L. (2020). Biosafety guideline issued to fix chronic management loopholes at virus labs. *Global Times*. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1179747.shtml> (last accessed on Oct 15, 2020).

^{xxii} Grady, D. (2020). Deadly germ research is shut down at army lab over safety concerns. *NYT Magazine*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/05/health/gorms-fort-detrick-biohazard.html> (last accessed on Oct 15, 2020).

^{xxiii} Miller, J. (2004). Russian scientist dies in Ebola accident at former weapons Lab. *NYT Magazine*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/25/world/russian-scientist-dies-in-ebola-accident-at-former-weapons-lab.html> (last accessed on Oct 15, 2020).

could potentially have occurred through animal-to-person contact if proper waste disposal and/or decontamination procedures were not followed.

CONCLUSIONS AND OUTLOOK

On the basis of our analysis, an artificial origin of SARS-CoV-2 is not a baseless conspiracy theory that is to be condemned^[66] and researchers have the responsibility to consider all possible causes for SARS-CoV-2 emergence. The insertion of human-adapted pangolin CoV RBD obtained by cell/animal serial passage and furin cleavage site could arise from site-directed mutagenesis experiments, in a context of evolutionary studies or development of pan-CoV vaccines or drugs. A recent article in *Nature*^[67] affirms that a laboratory origin for SARS-CoV-2 cannot be ruled out, as researchers could have been infected accidentally, and that gain-of-function experiments resulting in SARS-CoV-2 could have been performed at WIV. Genetic manipulation of SARS-CoV-2 may have been carried out in any laboratory in the world with access to the backbone sequence and the necessary equipment and it would not leave any trace. Modern technologies based on synthetic genetics platforms allow the reconstruction of viruses based on their genomic sequence, without the need of a natural isolate.^[68]

A thorough investigation on strain collections and research records in all laboratories involved in CoV research before SARS-CoV-2 outbreak is urgently needed. Special attention should be paid to strains of CoVs that were generated in virology laboratories but have not yet been published, as those possibly described in the deleted WIV database. Because finding a possible natural host could take years, as with the first SARS,^[67] or never succeed, equal priority should be given to investigating natural and laboratory origins of SARS-CoV-2.

Xiao Qiang, a research scientist at Berkeley, recently stated: "To understand exactly how this virus has originated is critical knowledge for preventing this from happening in the future."^[xxiv]

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are very grateful to Prof. Allan Krill (NTNU) for proof reading the manuscript, all the valuable comments and being open-minded about controversial hypotheses; Prof. Heribert Insam (Head of the Department of Microbiology; University of Innsbruck) for his support and Dr. Lawrence Sellin for all the useful information. A special thanks goes to Dr. Fernando Castro-Chavez (former Post-Doc at the New York Medical College) for his support with Research Gate. We are very thankful to René Bergelt, for having discovered the database that confirmed our finding that BtCoV4991 and RaTG13 refer to the same sample. Finally, we are extremely grateful to members of the D.R.A.S.T.I.C. (Decentralised Radical Autonomous Search Team Investigating COVID-19) Twitter group for all their work in uncovering many previously unpublished facts about SARS-CoV-2 and its relative strains. In particular, we are grateful to Luigi Warren for continuously probing the possible connection of the 2012 Mojiang pneumonia outbreak to WIV and SARS-CoV-2, to @TheSeeker268 for finding Chinese-language 2013 Xu MSc and 2016 Huang PhD theses, which have confirmed the SARS-like viral nature of the 2012 Mojiang pneumonia outbreak and have elucidated

"UNCLASSIFIED" WIV's database investigating that outbreak, including WIV's collection of the 4991/RaTG13 strain from the Mojiang mine, and to Francisco de Asis de Ribera Martin for providing us the English translation of the two theses, and also discovering the RaTG13 amplicon dates.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Rossana Segreto and Yuri Deigin do not have any conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

ORCID

Rossana Segreto <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2566-7042>

REFERENCES

1. Sirotkin, K., & Sirotkin, D. (2020). Might SARS-CoV-2 have arisen via serial passage through an animal host or cell culture? A potential explanation for much of the novel coronavirus' distinctive genome. *BioEssays*, 42, 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.1002/bies.202000091>
2. Andersen, K. G., Rambaut, A., Lipkin, W. I., Holmes, E. C., & Garry, R. F. (2020). The proximal origin of SARS-CoV-2. *Nat. Med.*, 26, 450-452. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41591-020-0820-9>
3. Zhou, P., Yang, X. L., Wang, X. G., Hu, B., Zhang, L., Zhang, W., ... Shi, Z. L. (2020). A pneumonia outbreak associated with a new coronavirus of probable bat origin. *Nature*, 579, 270-273. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-020-2012-7>
4. Cagliani, R., Forni, D., Clerici, M., & Sironi, M. (2020). Computational inference of selection underlying the evolution of the novel coronavirus, severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2. *J. Virol.*, 94, 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1128/jvi.00411-20>
5. Ge, X. Y., Wang, N., Zhang, W., Hu, B., Li, B., Zhang, Y. Z., ... Shi, Z. L. (2016). Coexistence of multiple coronaviruses in several bat colonies in an abandoned mineshaft. *Virol. Sin.*, 31, 31-40. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12250-016-3713-9>
6. Wu, Z., Yang, L., Yang, F., Ren, X., Jiang, J., Dong, J., ... Jin, Q. (2014). Novel henipa-like virus, mojiang paramyxovirus, in rats, China, 2012. *Emerg. Infect. Dis.*, 20, 1064-1066. <https://doi.org/10.3201/eid2006.131022>
7. Xu, L. (2013). The analysis of 6 patients with severe pneumonia caused by unknown viruses (Master's Thesis). Kunming Medical University, Emergency Medicine (professional degree). <http://eng.oversea.cnki.net/Kcms/detail/detail.aspx?filename=1013327523.nh&dbcode=CMFD&dbname=CMFD2014>
8. Huang, C. (2016). Novel virus discovery in bat and the exploration of receptor of bat coronavirus HKU9 (PhD Thesis). Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention. <http://eng.oversea.cnki.net/kcms/detail/detail.aspx?dbcode=CDFD&dbname=CDFDLAST2018&filename=1017118517.nh>
9. Wang, N., Luo, C., Liu, H., Yang, X., Hu, B., Zhang, W., ... Shi, Z. (2019). Characterization of a new member of alphacoronavirus with unique genomic features in *Rhinolophus* bats. *Viruses*, 11(4), 379. <https://doi.org/10.3390/v11040379>
10. Chen, L., Liu, W., Zhang, Q., Xu, K., Ye, G., Wu, W., ... Liu, Y. (2020). RNA based mNGS approach identifies a novel human coronavirus from two individual pneumonia cases in 2019 Wuhan outbreak. *Emerg. Microbes Infect.*, 9, 313-319. <https://doi.org/10.1080/22221751.2020.1725399>

xxiv <https://twitter.com/ydeigin/status/1262686286898397189> (last accessed on Oct 15, 2020).

11. Cohen J. (2022). A new coronavirus—COVID-19—speaks out. *Science*, 369, 487–488. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.369.6503.487>
12. Liu, P., Chen, W., & Chen, J. P. (2019). Viral metagenomics revealed sendai virus and coronavirus infection of malayan pangolins (*Manis javanica*). *Viruses*, 11(11), 979. <https://doi.org/10.3390/v11110979>
13. Bianchi, M., Benvenuto, D., Giovanetti, M., Angeletti, S., Ciccozzi, M., & Pascarella, S. (2020). Sars-CoV-2 envelope and membrane proteins: Structural differences linked to virus characteristics? *Biomed. Res. Int.*, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2020/4389089>
14. Schoeman, D., & Fielding, B. C. (2019). Coronavirus envelope protein: Current knowledge. *Viol. J.*, 16, 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12985-019-1182-0>
15. Hu, B., Zeng, L. P., Yang, X., Lou, G., X. Y., Zhang, W., Li, B., ... Shi, Z. L. (2017). Discovery of a rich gene pool of bat SARS-related coronaviruses provides new insights into the origin of SARS coronavirus. *PLoS Pathog.*, 13, 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.ppat.1006698>
16. Fan, Y., Zhao, K., Shi, Z. L., & Zhou, P. (2019). Bat coronaviruses in China. *Viruses*, 11(3), 210. <https://doi.org/10.3390/v11030210>
17. Ge, X. Y., Li, J. L., Yang, X., Lou, C., Mura, A. A., Zhu, G., Epstein, J. H., ... Shi, Z. L. (2013). Isolation and characterization of a bat SARS-like coronavirus that uses the ACE2 receptor. *Nature*, 503, 535–538. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nature12711>
18. Graham, R. L., & Baric, R. S. (2010). Recombination, reservoirs, and the modular spike: Mechanisms of coronavirus cross-species transmission. *J. Virol.*, 84, 3134–3146. <https://doi.org/10.1128/jvi.01394-09>
19. Menachery, V. D., Yount, B. L., Debbink, K., Agnihothram, S., Gralinski, L. E., Plante, J. A., ... Baric, R. S. (2015). A SARS-like cluster of circulating bat coronaviruses shows potential for human emergence. *Nat. Med.*, 21, 1508–1513. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nm.3985>
20. Johnson, B. A., Graham, R. L., & Menachery, V. D. (2018). Viral metagenomics, protein structure, and reverse genetics: Key strategies for investigating coronaviruses. *Virology*, 517, 30–37. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.virol.2017.12.009>
21. Racaniello, V. (2016). Moving beyond metagenomics to find the next pandemic virus. *PNAS*, 113, 2812–2814. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1601512113>
22. Weiss, S., Yitzhaki, S., & Shapira, S. C. (2015). Lessons to be learned from recent biosafety incidents in the United States. *Isr. Med. Assoc. J.*, 17, 269–273. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1601512113>
23. Casadevall, A., & Imperiale, M. J. (2014). Risks and benefits of gain-of-function experiments with pathogens of pandemic potential, such as influenza virus: A call for a science-based discussion. *MBio*, 5, 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1128/mBio.01730-14>
24. Agostini, M. L., Andres, E. L., Sims, A. C., Graham, R. L., Sheahan, T. P., Lu, X., ... Denison, M. R. (2018). Coronavirus susceptibility to the antiviral remdesivir (GS-5734) is mediated by the viral polymerase and the proofreading exonuclease. *MBio*, 9, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1128/mBio.00221-18>
25. Xia, S., Liu, M., Wang, C., Xu, W., Lan, Q., Feng, S., ... Lu, L. (2020). Inhibition of SARS-CoV-2 (previously 2019-nCoV) infection by a highly potent pan-coronavirus fusion inhibitor targeting its spike protein that harbors a high capacity to mediate membrane fusion. *Cell Res.*, 30, 343–355. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41422-020-0305-x>
26. Totura, A. L., & Bavari, S. (2019). Broad-spectrum coronavirus antiviral drug discovery. *Expert Opin. Drug Discov.*, 14, 397–412. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17460441.2019.1581171>
27. Wang, Y., Sun, Y., Wu, A., Xu, S., Pan, R., Zeng, C., ... Guo, D. (2015). Coronavirus nsp10/nsp16 Methyltransferase can be targeted by nsp10-derived peptide in vitro and in vivo to reduce replication and pathogenesis. *J. Virol.*, 89, 8416–8427. <https://doi.org/10.1128/jvi.00948-15>
28. Kuo, L., Godeke, G. J., Raamsman, M. J. B., Masters, P. S., & Rottier, P. J. M. (2000). Retargeting of coronavirus by substitution of the spike glycoprotein ectodomain: Crossing the host cell species barrier. *J. Virol.*, 74, 1393–1406. <https://doi.org/10.1128/jvi.74.3.1393-1406.2000>
29. Kissinger, J., & Kerton, E., & Baric, R. S. (2015). *Coronavirus: Methods and protocols*. London: Humana Press.
30. Becker, M. M., Graham, R. L., Donaldson, E. F., Rockx, B., Sims, A. C., Sheahan, T., ... Denison, M. R. (2008). Synthetic recombinant bat SARS-like coronavirus is infectious in cultured cells and in mice. *PNAS*, 105, 19944–19949. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0808116105>
31. Menachery, V. D., Yount, B. L., Sims, A. C., Debbink, K., Agnihothram, S. S., Gralinski, L. E., ... Baric, R. S. (2016). SARS-like WIV1-CoV poised for human emergence. *PNAS*, 113, 3048–3053. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1517719113>
32. Li, X., Zai, J., Zhao, Q., Nie, Q., Li, Y., Foley, B. T., & Chaillon, A. (2020). Evolutionary history, potential intermediate animal host, and cross-species analyses of SARS-CoV-2. *J. Med. Virol.*, 92, 602–611. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jmv.25731>
33. Lam, T. T. Y., Jia, N., Zhang, Y. W., Shum, M. H. H., Jiang, J. F., Zhu, H. C., ... Cao, W. C. (2020). Identifying SARS-CoV-2-related coronaviruses in Malayan pangolins. *Nature*, 583, 282–285. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-020-2169-0>
34. Xiao, K., Zhai, J., Feng, Y., Zhou, N., Zhang, X., Zou, J. J., ... Shen, Y. (2020). Isolation of SARS-CoV-2-related coronavirus from Malayan pangolins. *Nature*, 583, 286–289. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-020-2313-x>
35. Zhang, T., Wu, Q., & Zhang, Z. (2020). Probable pangolin origin of SARS-CoV-2 associated with the COVID-19 outbreak. *Curr. Biol.*, 30, 1346–1351.E2. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2020.03.022>
36. Coutard, B., Valle, C., de Lamballerie, X., Canard, B., Seidah, N. G., & Decroly, E. (2020). The spike glycoprotein of the new coronavirus 2019-nCoV contains a furin-like cleavage site absent in CoV of the same clade. *Antivir. Res.*, 176, 104742. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.antiviral.2020.104742>
37. Letko, M., Marzi, A., & Munster, V. (2020). Functional assessment of cell entry and receptor usage for SARS-CoV-2 and other lineage B beta-coronaviruses. *Nat. Microbiol.*, 5, 562–569. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41564-020-0688-y>
38. Wang, Q., Qiu, Y., Li, J. Y., Zhou, Z. J., Liao, C. H., & Ge, X. Y. (2020). A unique protease cleavage site predicted in the spike protein of the novel pneumonia coronavirus (2019-nCoV) potentially related to viral transmissibility. *Viol. Sin.*, 35, 337–339. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12250-020-00212-7>
39. Lau, S., Wang, P., Mok, B. W., Zhang, A. J., Chu, H., Lee, A. C., ... Chen, H. (2020). Attenuated SARS-CoV-2 variants with deletions at the S1 / S2 junction. *Emerg. Microbes Infect.*, 9, 837–842. <https://doi.org/10.1080/22221751.2020.1756700>
40. Hoffmann, M., & Kleine-Weber, H. (2020). A multibasic cleavage site in the spike protein of SARS-CoV-2 is essential for infection of human lung cells. *Mol. Cell.*, 78, 779–784.E5. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.molcel.2020.04.022>
41. Kaundun, S. S., Marchegiani, E., Hutchings, S. J., & Baker, K. (2019). Derived polymorphic amplified cleaved sequence (dPACS): A novel PCR-RFLP procedure for detecting known single nucleotide and deletion – insertion polymorphisms. *Int. J. Mol. Sci.*, 20(13), 3193. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijms20133193>
42. Zeng, L. P., Gao, Y. T., Ge, X. Y., Zhang, Q., Peng, C., Yang, X. L., ... Shi, Z. L. (2016). Bat severe acute respiratory syndrome-like coronavirus WIV1 encodes an extra accessory protein, ORFX, involved in modulation. *J. Virol.*, 90, 6573–6582. <https://doi.org/10.1128/JVI.03079-15>
43. Khan, S. G., Muniz-Medina, V., Shahlavi, T., Baker, C. C., Inui, H., Ueda, T., ... Kraemer, K. H. (2002). The human XPC DNA repair gene: Arrangement, splice site information content and influence of a single nucleotide polymorphism in a splice acceptor site on alternative splicing and function. *Nucleic Acids Res.*, 30, 3624–3631. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC134237/>
44. Liu, Z., Zheng, H., Lin, H., Li, M., Yuan, R., Peng, J., ... Lu, J. (2020). Identification of common deletions in the spike protein of severe acute

- respiratory coronavirus A-000009365040-20. <https://doi.org/10.1128/JVI.00790-20>
45. Zhou, H., Chen, X., Hu, T., Li, J., Song, H., Liu, Y., ... Shi, W. (2020). A Novel bat coronavirus closely related to SARS-CoV-2 contains natural insertions at the S1/S2 cleavage site of the spike protein. *Curr. Biol.*, 30, 2196-2203.E3. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2020.05.023>
 46. Steinhauer, D. A. (1999). Role of hemagglutinin cleavage for the pathogenicity of influenza virus. *Virology*, 258, 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1006/viro.1999.9716>
 47. Seyran, M., Pizzol, D., Adadi, P., El-Aziz, T. M. A., Hassan, S. S., Soares, A., ... Brufsky, A. M. (2020). Questions concerning the proximal origin of SARS-CoV-2. *J. Med. Virol.*, 03. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jmv.26478>
 48. Wang, L. F., & Anderson, D. E. (2019). Viruses in bats and potential spillover to animals and humans. *Curr. Opin. Virol.*, 34, 79-89. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.coviro.2018.12.007>
 49. Wan, Y., Shang, J., Graham, R., Baric, R. S., & Li, F. (2020). Receptor recognition by the novel coronavirus from Wuhan: An analysis based on decade-long structural studies of SARS coronavirus. *J. Virol.*, 94(7), 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1128/jvi.00127-20>
 50. Cui, J., Li, F., & Shi, Z. L. (2019). Origin and evolution of pathogenic coronaviruses. *Nat. Rev. Microbiol.*, 17, 181-192. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41579-018-0118-9>
 51. Fraguas Bringas, C., & Booth, D. (2020). Identification of a SARS-like bat coronavirus that shares structural features with the spike glycoprotein receptor-binding domain of SARS-CoV-2. *Access Microbiol.*, 10-17. <https://doi.org/10.1099/acmi.0.000166>
 52. Mallapaty, S. (2020). Why does the coronavirus spread so easily between people? *Nature*, 579, 183. <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-00660-x>
 53. Almázan, F., Sola, I., Zúñiga, S., Marquez-Jurado, S., Morales, L., Becares, M., & Enjuanes, L. (2014). Coronavirus reverse genetic systems: Infectious clones and replicons. *Virus Res.*, 189, 262-270. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.virusres.2014.05.026>
 54. Cheng, J., Zhao, Y., Xu, G., Zhang, K., Jia, W., Sun, Y., ... Zhang, G. (2019). The S2 subunit of QX-type infectious bronchitis coronavirus spike protein is an essential determinant of neurotropism. *Viruses*, 11(10), 972. <https://doi.org/10.3390/v11100972>
 55. Wrapp, D., Wang, N., Corbett, K. S., Goldsmith, J. A., Hsieh, C. L., Abiona, O., ... McLellan, J. S. (2020). Cryo-EM structure of the 2019-nCoV spike in the prefusion conformation. *Science*, 367, 1260-1263. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abb2507>
 56. Du, L., Tai, W., Yang, Y., Zhao, G., Zhu, Q., Sun, S., ... Li, F. (2016). Introduction of neutralizing immunogenicity index to the rational design of MERS coronavirus subunit vaccines. *Nat. Commun.*, 7, 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1038/ncomms13473>
 57. Wahl, A., De, C., Abad Fernandez, M., Lenarcic, E. M., Xu, Y., Cockrell, A. S., ... Garcia, J. V. (2019). Precision mouse models with expanded tropism for human pathogens. *Nat. Biotechnol.*, 37, 1163-1173. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41587-019-0225-9>
 58. He, T., Wu, Y., Wu, L., He, T., Wang, C. (2015). Genomic characterization and infectivity of a novel SARS-like coronavirus in Chinese bats. *Emerg. Microbes Infect.*, 7, 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41426-018-0155-5>
 59. Hron, T., Farkašová, H., Gifford, R. J., Benda, P., Hulva, P., Görföl, T., ... Elleder, D. (2018). Remnants of an ancient deltaretrovirus in the genomes of horseshoe bats (Rhinolophidae). *Viruses*, 10(4), 185. <https://doi.org/10.3390/v10040185>
 60. Shang, J., Ye, G., Shi, K., Wan, Y., Luo, C., Aihara, H., ... Li, F. (2020). Structural basis of receptor recognition by SARS-CoV-2. *Nature*, 581, 221-224. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-020-2179-y>
 61. Wertheim, J. O. (2010). The re-emergence of H1N1 influenza virus in 1977: A cautionary tale for estimating divergence times using biologically unrealistic sampling dates. *PLoS ONE*, 5, 2-5. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0011184>
 62. Cyranoski, D. (2019). Chinese institutes investigate pathogen outbreaks in lab workers. *Nature*. <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-03863-z>
 63. Lim, P. L., Kurup, A., Gopalakrishna, G., Chan, K. P., Wong, C. W., & Leo, Y. S. (2004). Laboratory-acquired severe acute respiratory syndrome. *N. Engl. J. Med.*, 350, 1740-1745. <https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMoa032565>
 64. Cyranoski D. (2017). Inside the Chinese lab poised to study world's most dangerous pathogens. *Nature*, 542, 399-401 <https://doi.org/10.1038/nature.2017.21487>
 65. Totura, A., Livingston, V., Frick, O., Dyer, D., Nichols, D., & Nalca, A. (2020). Small particle aerosol exposure of African Green Monkeys to MERS-CoV as a model for highly pathogenic coronavirus infection. *Emerg. Infect. Dis.*, 26. <https://doi.org/10.3201/eid2612.201664>
 66. Calisher, C., Carroll, D., Colwell, R., Corley, R. B., Daszak, P., Drosten, C., ... Turner, M. (2019). Statement in support of the scientists, public health professionals, and medical professionals of China combatting COVID-19. *The Lancet*, 395, E42-E43. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30418-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30418-9)
 67. Cyranoski, D. (2020). The biggest mystery: What it will take to trace the coronavirus source. *Nature*. <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-020-01541-z>
 68. Thao, T. T. N., Labrousseau, F., Ebert, N., V'kovski, P., Stalder, H., Portmann, J., ... Thiel, V. (2020). Rapid reconstruction of SARS-CoV-2 using a synthetic genomics platform. *Nature*, 582, 561-565. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-020-2294-9>

How to cite this article: Segreto, R., & Deigin, Y. (2020). The genetic structure of SARS-CoV-2 does not rule out a laboratory origin. *BioEssays*, e2000240. <https://doi.org/10.1002/bies.202000240>.

From: (b)(6)@state.gov>

To: Legal-L-Attorneys-DL <Legal-L-Attorneys-DL@state.gov>

Subject: State Department News Clips (6-22-20)

Date: Mon, 22 Jun 2020 12:39:25 +0000

STATE DEPARTMENT NEWS CLIPS

Prepared for the U.S. Department of State

By TechMIS

www.TechMIS.com

Mobile User Copy

TO: State Department & Staff

DATE: Monday, June 22, 2020 5:00 AM ET

Department of State News

Cargo of Iranian Food Is Set to Arrive in Struggling Venezuela (Bloomberg)

Iran ship reaches Venezuelan waters with cargo of food (Reuters)

EU and China to seek to cool tensions at video summit (Reuters)

With ties in the balance, EU and China hold tense summit (Yahoo News/AFP)

The Industries Most Vulnerable to Cyberattacks—and Why (Wall Street Journal)

Acting U.S. attorney in New York expected to advance politically sensitive cases, safeguard office's independence, colleagues say (Washington Post)

[Russia] Large-scale Russian treaty violations revealed on eve of new talks (Washington Times)

[Russia] US, Russia arms talks start with little hope of accord (Yahoo News/AFP)

[China] Trump Says He Avoided Punishing China Over Uighur Camps to Protect Trade Talks (New York Times)

[China] Trump says he held off Xinjiang sanctions due to trade talks: Axios interview (Reuters)

[China] U.S. Rejects Additional Flights Sought by Chinese Airlines (Bloomberg)

[Japan] Fire burning at hazmat facility at US air base on Okinawa (AP)

[Afghanistan] Coronavirus: UN condemns Afghan healthcare attacks amid pandemic (Yahoo News/BBC)

[Venezuela] Trump says he would consider meeting Venezuelas Maduro but has 'turned them down': Axios (Reuters)

[Venezuela] Trump cold on Guaidó, would consider meeting Maduro (Axios)

Editorials and Op-eds

China's Art of War in Sri Lanka (The National Interest)

Rules for Clinical Trials in a Pandemic (Wall Street Journal)

How to Prepare for the Coronavirus's Impact on Terrorism (The National Interest)

[China] Mutual misery society: United States and China suffer alone together (Washington Times)

[China] China Faces a Rice Bowl Dilemma After Covid (Bloomberg)

[Japan] Japan's Work Culture Gets a Needed Covid-19 Shock (Bloomberg)

[Cuba] Cuba's Shameful Trafficking of Its Doctors (Wall Street Journal)

Coronavirus News

WHO reports highest single-day increase in confirmed coronavirus cases (Axios)

New evidence suggests America's fight with COVID-19 is far from over (ABC News)

Coronavirus more likely infected people through natural channels, says former health official (Washington Times)

Near East & North Africa

Spyware technology found on phone of Moroccan journalist, report says (Washington Post)

Saudi downturn deepens Yemen's economic despair (Yahoo News/AFP)

[Algeria] Algeria sentences prominent activist to prison (Yahoo News/AFP)

[Iraq] Water hyacinth pest chokes Iraq's vital waterways (Yahoo News/AFP)

Europe and Eurasia

Coronavirus may change Nordic friendships forever (Politico)

[Belarus] Political Grip Shaky, Belarus Leader Blames Longtime Ally: Russia (New York Times)

[France] In France, Police Tactics Are Less Lethal—but Still Stir Controversy (Wall Street Journal)

[France] Police clash with music festival attendees in Paris and Nantes (Reuters)

[Netherlands] Dutch police detain 400 after protest over coronavirus restrictions (Reuters)

[Serbia] Serbian ruling party wins by landslide in Europe's first Covid-19 election (Politico)

[United Kingdom] UK's Johnson to announce lockdown easing plans on Tuesday (Reuters)

[United Kingdom] Boris Johnson to discuss easing lockdown and two-metre rule with scientists (Yahoo News/PA Media)

[United Kingdom] Jailed UK-Iranian pleads with PM Johnson to help inmates (Yahoo News/AFP)

[United Kingdom] PM urged to reconsider Dfid merger with Foreign Office by almost 200 charities (Yahoo News/PA Media)

[United Kingdom] UK terror suspect identified as Libyan national, security source says (CNN)

[United Kingdom] Suspect known to MI5 held over terror knife attack in park that killed three (Yahoo News/PA Media)

East Asia and Pacific

[Australia] Australia Fears Second Wave as State Tightens Virus Controls (Bloomberg)

[Australia] Virgin Australia bondholders working on potential revival plan - source (Reuters)

[China] China's new low-sulphur fuel oil contract jumps in debut trade (Reuters)

[China] China Security Law Will Override Hong Kong Legal System (Bloomberg)

[New Zealand] New Zealand central bank to stand pat but keep dovish view, as pandemic rages: Reuters poll (Reuters)

[North Korea] N. Korea says millions of leaflets readied against South (Yahoo News/AFP)

[Taiwan] Taiwan boosts domestic defence development plan with new jet (Reuters)

South and Central Asia

[India] New Virus Hotspots Are Emerging in Rural Villages Across India (Bloomberg)

[India] Are more women dying of Covid-19 in India? (Yahoo News/BBC News)

[India] Many Indian citizens believe their government is trying to steal and sell their data. Here's why (CNN)

Western Hemisphere Affairs

[Argentina] Argentina's Buenos Aires Province extends debt revamp deadline to July 31 (Reuters)

[Bolivia] Bolivia president signs off on September elections despite virus fears (Yahoo News/AFP)

[Brazil] Brazil passes 50,000 coronavirus deaths as outbreak worsens (Reuters)

[Brazil] Coronavirus: Brazil becomes second country to pass 50,000 deaths (Yahoo News/BBC News)

[Mexico] Mexico catches alleged gang boss relatives; gang burns cars (AP)

[Panama] Panama exhumes remains of 19 victims from 1989 US invasion (Yahoo News/BBC News)

[Peru] Machu Picchu July reopening ruled out over fears of virus spread (Yahoo News/AFP)

[Venezuela] High Court battle over £800m of Venezuelan gold in Bank of England vaults (Yahoo News/PA Media)

Sub-Saharan Africa

Coronavirus lockdowns increase poaching in Asia, Africa (AP)

[Zambia] U.S. farming body and Zambian firm partner aim to boost crop yields (Reuters)

Network TV News Coverage

Coronavirus Spreads Worldwide as Some Countries Reopen (CBS Weekend News)

Iranian Officials Say Cargo Ship With Food Docked in Venezuela (CBS News)

[United Kingdom] Prime Minister Boris Johnson Says Full-Scale Investigation into Reading Stabbing (CBS News)

[China] Trump Avoided Sanctions Over Uyghur Camps To Save Trade Deal (CNN's The Situation Room With Wolf Blitzer)

[Afghanistan] UN Raises Concerns Over Deliberate Attacks on Healthcare Workers in Afghanistan (CBS News)

Headlines

The Washington Post

The New York Times

The Wall Street Journal

ABC News

CBS News

CNN

Fox News

NBC News

Washington Schedule

President

Vice President

Senate

House of Representatives

Department of State News**Cargo of Iranian Food Is Set to Arrive in Struggling Venezuela (Bloomberg)**

Bloomberg [6/21/2020 5:45 PM, Jonathan Gilbert, Fabiola Zerpa, 6400K, Negative]

A ship from Iran was scheduled to deliver food to Venezuela on Sunday, according to Bloomberg's vessel-tracking maps.

The tanker, called the Golsan, was just off the coast of Caracas on Sunday evening, Golsan left Iran's Bandar Abbas port a month ago and sailed through the Suez Canal.

Venezuela state television reported the news, citing a tweet by the Iranian embassy in Caracas that said the ship's food cargo would supply the first Iranian supermarket in the South American nation.

Iran has recently been shipping fuel to Venezuela, whose socialist government has

squandered some of the world's biggest oil reserves and is now rationing gasoline.

After years of a well-documented economic collapse, Venezuela is now on the verge of famine, the International Crisis Group has warned. And the tightening vice of U.S. sanctions threatens to strangle what little foreign food and oil is managing to enter the country.

Iran ship reaches Venezuelan waters with cargo of food (Reuters)

Reuters [6/21/2020 7:40 PM, Deisy Buitrago, 5304K, Neutral]

An Iranian ship was approaching the Venezuelan port of La Guaira on Sunday with a cargo of food that will supply the South American nation's first Iranian supermarket, according to Refinitiv Eikon and Iran's embassy in Venezuela.

Iran supplied 1.5 million barrels of fuel to Venezuela last month amid a collapse of refinery operations and tightening sanctions by the United States that has made it more difficult for Venezuela to obtain fuel on international markets.

The Iranian-flagged general cargo ship Golsan, owned by Mosakhar Darya Shipping Co, departed on May 15 from Bandar Abbas. Five tankers left for the Caribbean from the same port in March after loading fuel, according to Eikon data.

"The Golsan will arrive carrying food to open the first Iranian supermarket in Venezuela," the Iranian Embassy wrote on Saturday via its Twitter account. It did not provide details.

Venezuela's Information Ministry did not immediately reply to a request for comment.

Iran is expected to dispatch two to three monthly shipments of gasoline to its ally Venezuela, sources close to the matter said, which would help offload the gasoline inventory that Iran accumulates, while helping to alleviate the fuel shortage in Venezuela.

The growing bilateral trade could lead to retaliation by the United States, which has enacted extensive sanctions programs against the two countries.

EU and China to seek to cool tensions at video summit (Reuters)

Reuters [6/21/2020 8:08 PM, Robin Emmott, 5304K, Neutral]

The European Union and China will seek to cool tensions on Monday at a video summit, their first formal talks since ties soured over European accusations that Beijing has spread disinformation about the novel coronavirus.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Council President Charles - the EU's chief executive and chairman - will hold video conferences with Premier Li Keqiang and President Xi Jinping.

"We are ready to work with China. But we also expect China to assume its responsibilities as one of the world's largest economies," said a senior official helping prepare the summit. "The pandemic has heightened some (EU) concerns."

No joint statement is expected after the summit, scheduled to start at 0800 GMT.

EU officials say China has sought to pressure EU countries that criticise its handling of the novel coronavirus, using social media to spread fake reports of European neglect of COVID-19 patients. Beijing has denied wrongdoing.

Even before the pandemic, the two trading partners had differences, including over Hong Kong and an investment pact that is being negotiated.

The EU has also faced U.S. pressure to take a tougher stance on China. The bloc is caught between the two powers - needing both and reluctant to alienate either.

EU governments have expressed "grave concern" over China's security law for Hong Kong, which democracy activists, diplomats and some businesses say will jeopardise its semi-autonomous status and role as a global financial hub.

China's parliament reacted angrily on Saturday to a resolution by the EU assembly protesting against the security law.

The EU and China are signatories of the 2015 Iran nuclear accord, and Brussels is eager to ensure cooperation with Beijing on climate policy, but the EU accuses China of failing to open up its economy despite a 2019 agreement to do so.

Germany has postponed an EU leaders' summit with Xi in September, citing the coronavirus, though diplomats said it was in part because of the impasse in investment negotiations.

With ties in the balance, EU and China hold tense summit (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [6/21/2020 10:14 PM, Damon Wake, 12818K, Neutral]

Chinese leaders and senior EU officials hold a video summit Monday with tensions rising over new tariffs targeting Chinese firms and European disquiet at Beijing's assertiveness on the world stage.

The heads of the EU's main institutions will discuss the coronavirus with top Chinese leaders, after Brussels infuriated Beijing by accusing it of a campaign of disinformation around the pandemic.

The EU will be represented by European Council President Charles Michel and European Commission head Ursula von der Leyen.

Premier Li Keqiang will be the main Chinese representative and President Xi Jinping is also expected to make a video statement.

China and the EU both say they want to strengthen ties, but the relationship is tangled in a thicket of disagreements on topics ranging from trade and investment rules to human rights and national security.

Beijing's ambassador to the EU said last week that Monday's talks were a chance to make relations "more productive and substantive by seizing opportunities and addressing challenges".

But he rapped Brussels over plans for tougher rules for heavily subsidised foreign companies, which would particularly target Chinese firms, saying the EU was not practising the openness it preached to others.

US President Donald Trump has pursued a bruising trade war with China, and warned last week of "complete decoupling" while suggesting the novel coronavirus is sometimes called "Kung Flu", in a jibe at China.

The EU has taken a more balanced approach, characterising China as a "systemic rival" and competitor but also as a partner on some issues. The bloc's foreign policy chief Josep Borrell has urged a hard-headed approach.

At talks with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo last week, Borrell proposed a dialogue with Washington aimed at forging a common trans-Atlantic front against Beijing -- though he has also stressed the EU must pursue its own interests and not simply toe the American line.

- Human rights -

The bloc has sought to challenge China on human rights issues such as Tibet and Hong Kong, where European capitals are extremely concerned about Beijing's proposed new security law.

On Friday, the EU demanded the immediate release of a Chinese human rights lawyer jailed for "inciting subversion of state power" after penning an open letter calling for constitutional reforms.

But while such calls have occasionally irritated Beijing, they have done nothing to alter China's course and it is not expected to budge on Monday.

Cui Hongjian of the China Institute of International Studies said officials would defend their position on Hong Kong and explain the need for the new law -- as Foreign Minister Wang Yi did in recent talks with EU counterparts.

The EU's efforts to stand up to President Xi's increasingly assertive China have been stymied by a lack of unity among its 27 member states, many of which have been courted assiduously by the Asian giant.

A meeting of EU foreign ministers last month dedicated to China highlighted the bloc's struggles -- Borrell voiced "grave concern" at Beijing's security clampdown in Hong Kong but said sanctions were all but out of the question.

- Trade and investment -

The European Commission, the bloc's executive arm, has announced plans for new legislation aimed at ensuring foreign firms backed by heavy state subsidies do not distort competition in Europe.

There is particular concern about Chinese companies swooping in to buy European companies weakened by the coronavirus-triggered recession.

Specifically targeting China's global reach, the EU on Monday last week imposed an unprecedented tariff on Chinese subsidies to exporters, but not those in China itself.

The measure involved EU imports from Egypt of glass-fibre fabrics that were made by subsidiaries of two Chinese firms.

This was the first time the EU took aim at subsidies granted by a country to exporters located in another state.

Meanwhile, talks towards a China-EU investment agreement remain at a standstill, despite a joint pledge to try to get somewhere by the end of the year during the German EU presidency.

The Industries Most Vulnerable to Cyberattacks—and Why (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [6/21/2020 8:36 PM, Rob Sloan, Neutral]

A number of important industries are dangerously vulnerable to cyberattacks. Small businesses are far less prepared than big ones. And plenty of companies aren't taking basic steps to improve their readiness, leaving them exposed to breaches that can threaten their existence.

These are some of the findings from a survey of information security officers at nearly 400 companies by WSJ Pro Research. The survey offers a revealing snapshot of the state of cybersecurity—in particular, what kinds of companies are unprepared and why.

The results are a wake-up call for industries that need to get their act together. And they provide a road map for what slow-moving companies need to do to make sure they protect their at-risk assets. The price of not doing so could be high, and perhaps devastating.

"Even today, after so many documented cyber incidents, some businesses lag behind in their preparation or, worse, they react in knee-jerk ways to today's incident with no vision or strategy to address tomorrow's," says Alan Levine, chairman of the advisory board for Carnegie Mellon University's chief information security officer program.

Mr. Levine, who spent 20 years as the chief information security officer at Alcoa Inc. and its successor, Arconic Corp., says there are too many "ostrich" organizations that have their heads in a hole. "They need to look up, look around and see cybersecurity as an organizational imperative regardless of sector."

WSJ Pro Research, which provides data and research as part of The Wall Street Journal's professional information offerings, surveyed information-security executives across different sectors and company sizes to see how they view the risks they face and the steps they are taking to protect their data.

Some of the key findings:

Organizations aren't necessarily prepared for the threats they are most concerned about. Ransomware was highly concerning, for instance, with nearly 80% viewing it as high risk, but just under 70% felt prepared to deal with it.

Manufacturing, government and retailing were behind other industries in important areas. Fewer than two-thirds of manufacturers and retailers have any cybersecurity program. Retailers were least likely to feel prepared to defend themselves against ransomware attacks. Government departments were also among the least prepared for ransomware attacks and well below average in offering cybersecurity training to their executives, as well as in identifying critical data. By contrast, health care reported surprisingly strong preparedness.

Small companies tended to lag behind large ones in preparedness. For instance, only 63% of companies with under \$50 million in revenue have a cybersecurity program, in contrast to 81% of companies with over \$1 billion in revenue. More concerning, 15% of smaller companies have no plan to put a cybersecurity program in place. In addition, the very largest businesses were almost twice as likely to already hold cyber insurance than the very smallest businesses—39% of which had no plans to buy a policy in the next 12 months.

The findings come at a critical time for businesses. Not only are they grappling with the pandemic and economic crisis, but cybercriminals have taken advantage of the chaos to step up their attacks. Forty-two percent of companies have faced an attack in the past year, the survey found.

And break-ins can be disastrous. They often impose large costs, waste time and resources, pose a big risk to a company's reputation and brand—and can affect perceptions of a whole sector.

Yet cyber risks are stubbornly hard to address. Many executives fail to prioritize the problem or even to understand it. The subject can be complex and technical, the demand for talent outweighs the supply, and solutions can be expensive.

There is no single way to define what preparedness looks like, but it includes the ability to detect and respond to breaches, as well as develop a security-conscious workforce. The survey focused on eight measures of readiness, including having a cybersecurity program, identifying critical data that need protecting, training employees and company leaders, and having cyber insurance.

Several measures were found to be crucial indicators for how prepared a company is to deal with cyber risks.

Companies with cyber insurance, for instance, were likely to perform better on other aspects of preparedness. Simply having insurance suggests businesses have assessed their risk, understand their critical data assets and are aware of the potential for disruption if attacked.

The businesses may also be making efforts to decrease their insurance premium by taking risk-reduction measures.

Somewhat less common, but equally important, is delivering tailored cybersecurity training to executives, who are often targeted by cybercriminals for the extensive data to which they have access.

For example, companies that conducted executive-level training were more likely to have identified and protected critical data (84% over the 72% average), to have insurance coverage (63% over 51%) and far more likely to have an incident-response plan (84% over 70%).

The survey highlighted the gaps between companies' perception of certain threats and how prepared companies feel they are to defend themselves. Ransomware—malicious software used by criminals to hijack computers and extort the user—is considered high risk by 78% of companies surveyed, but just under 70% of respondents in the survey said they believed they are well prepared to deal with such attacks. By contrast, nearly 80% of companies felt well prepared to deal with malware, another threat considered high risk.

Another challenging area for all companies was assessing the effect of attacks on an organization's supply chain or third-party suppliers. More than 70% of all organizations saw it as a major threat, but less than 60% felt prepared. Only 62% of larger businesses—those with revenue of more than \$250 million—were able to quantify and qualify the risk to or from their suppliers, though this was better than the 42% of the country's smallest firms. Even financial-services firms—often considered the most advanced in cybersecurity—lagged behind, with only six out of 10 firms managing the risk well.

The survey also demonstrated how companies' vulnerabilities—and their progress in addressing them—varied across different industries.

Industrial and manufacturing firms are struggling with third-party risk, with just over half having an understanding of those risks that could affect their operations. Fewer than two-thirds of manufacturers have a cybersecurity program, and the sector came out at the bottom in having an incident-response plan, a step that suggests readiness to respond when an attack does occur.

Furthermore, greater percentages of manufacturing companies said they were not planning to implement improvements in important areas anytime in the next 12 months. For example, 63% of manufacturers currently have no cyber insurance, and 37% have no plans to purchase coverage within the next 12 months. Cybersecurity training isn't in the plans for manufacturers for the coming year, either: Twenty-two percent don't intend to implement employee training, and 26% said executive training won't happen. And 15% have no plans to identify critical data worth protecting in the next year.

Manufacturing lines and industrial processes often run on operating systems or industrial-control systems that no longer receive security updates due to the age of the software. Taking systems offline for maintenance can be prohibitively expensive or disruptive to operations. "[They] often rely on legacy infrastructure and applications that require unsupported platforms for continued operations," says Andrew Rubin, CEO and co-founder of Illumio, a Sunnyvale, Calif., cybersecurity company. As a result, many manufacturers struggle to create effective cybersecurity strategies and controls.

Automation and the implementation of Internet of Things devices into industrial environments are introducing new risks to manage and more places for hackers to strike. Mr. Rubin says more breaches are starting to prompt greater awareness of the risks in manufacturing. "Failures are propelling action," he says. "Compromises and data loss among manufacturers are driving a desire to transform."

Among the industries least prepared for ransomware is retail, where only 62% of companies were confident they are prepared to defend themselves against such attacks. Large databases about customers and loyalty-program members make retailers a prime target for cybercriminals, says Mun Valiji, former Group CISO of Sainsbury's supermarkets, a major U.K.-based retailer, who left his post in March.

Even as the industry grows far more digital, retailers have been reluctant to add security measures that will affect customers' experience on their e-commerce sites. "There is a very fine line between delivering an awesome customer experience online and striking the right security balance," Mr. Valiji says.

Government departments at a local and federal level were also weak in some areas. For instance, they showed less confidence than most sectors in their own preparedness for ransomware attacks. Government agencies, along with construction companies, were also well below the 58% average of companies that offer executive training in cybersecurity, with only around 42% of both sectors saying they deliver the training.

The large amounts of personal data local government agencies often hold make them tempting targets for attackers, but tight budgets restrict access to cutting-edge security technologies and mean they are unable to compete with the higher salaries on offer in the private sector. In early June, cybersecurity-news website Krebsonsecurity.com reported the city of Florence in Alabama paid a ransom of \$291,000 after criminals locked up the city's IT systems. The city's mayor confirmed the attack and payment.

The health-care sector reported far less vulnerability than other areas. Health care is sometimes seen as one of the most targeted sectors. Yet, while 63% of construction and infrastructure companies admitted cybersecurity breaches on one or more occasions in the past 12 months, only 17% of health-care organizations said they had been compromised.

"We think the reduction is due to a combination of factors, including improvements in the cybersecurity posture of health-care organizations," says Dave Wong, vice president with cyber-incident response provider Mandiant, a division of FireEye Inc., "but the behavior of attackers had also changed."

In 2017, health care was the third-most-targeted sector, according to Mandiant's annual threat report. By 2019, security improvements and evolution of the attackers' tactics led to the sector dropping to eighth place. Cybercriminals follow the money, Mr. Wong says, and when fewer ransoms were being paid, they shifted their focus elsewhere. "Ransomware operators previously targeted hospitals knowing that the operational disruption could potentially cost patients' lives," he says. "Now, the same ransomware operators target larger companies with deeper pockets."

Security preparedness also varied by business size, with smaller companies lagging behind

larger ones in a number of areas. Only 63% of companies with under \$50 million in revenue have a cybersecurity program, in contrast to 81% of companies with over \$1 billion in revenue.

A lack of cybersecurity preparedness in the small to medium-size business sector can affect other businesses. Within supply chains, a supplier could be used as a steppingstone to compromise the customer's network, as happened in the 2013 breach of Target Corp., where hackers gained access to the company's network via an HVAC supplier. Also, attacks that cause operational disruption could have a knock-on effect on customer operations.

The survey highlighted a number of areas where companies are making progress in protecting their at-risk assets.

One critical aspect of a cybersecurity program is the identification and protection of a company's critical data assets. If the confidentiality of the critical data assets is lost, the integrity of the data is compromised or the data is no longer available, disruption will be significant. Across all businesses in the survey, 72% have completed an assessment of what data is critical and have taken steps to protect it. A further 22% plan to conduct such a review in the coming 12 months.

Cyber insurance is another key area. Overall, 51% of all businesses had purchased cyber-insurance coverage, and a further 24% planned to purchase coverage in the coming 12 months.

Still, many small businesses choose not to take on coverage, says James Trainor, senior vice president at Aon Cyber Solutions, a unit of insurance provider Aon PLC. "Small businesses often don't have the resources—financial or personnel—to conduct a robust cyber assessment and risk-quantification process," he says. But he also was concerned over the 35% of large companies that didn't already hold cyber insurance, citing the potential for catastrophic losses. "I'm not sure how a board is exercising its fiduciary responsibility to protect its shareholders and the firm from this growing risk without cyber insurance," he says.

When it comes to training and awareness, the data show 68% of companies are educating employees. But 45% of businesses under \$50 million in revenue have not yet implemented training.

Somewhat less common, but equally important, is delivering training to executives. Government agencies and construction companies are well below the 58% average, with only around 42% of both sectors saying they deliver the training.

Training executives is less generic than training users at a large scale. The messaging must be driven by the unique set of risks and threats faced by individuals and companies, and the strategies that should be employed to counter those risks. Such training, regardless of industry, is "a very nuanced conversation," says Jason Hoenich, president of cybersecurity company Habit8.

"Good cybersecurity begins with good leadership, and these functions are best led by a

chief information officer who is trained, informed and capable," says Mr. Levine of Carnegie Mellon. A CISO's role, he says, is "to see the circumference of the organizational wheel, to understand every single place where good cybersecurity strategy can make a positive difference for the organization." He adds: "Good leaders know their current state, define a better state, and design a path to get from here to there."

Acting U.S. attorney in New York expected to advance politically sensitive cases, safeguard office's independence, colleagues say (Washington Post)

Washington Post [6/21/2020 8:12 PM, Shayna Jacobs, 18460K, Neutral]

When Attorney General William P. Barr announced Friday night that Manhattan U.S. Attorney Geoffrey Berman would step down and the post would be filled on an interim basis by the sitting chief prosecutor in neighboring New Jersey, Justice Department veterans and legal observers were baffled.

Why would Barr not promote Berman's second-in-command, Audrey Strauss, as is customary while a president's new nominee awaits Senate confirmation?

Among the attorney general's critics, an answer soon became evident: Berman's departure was neither planned nor voluntary but driven by long-simmering frustrations over his office's pursuit of investigations targeting President Trump's interests and members of his inner circle.

Berman's refusal to leave quietly — he indicated a desire to ensure that "important cases continue unimpeded" — forced Barr's hand. On Saturday the attorney general announced that plans had changed and Strauss, 72, would take charge instead while the nomination of Securities and Exchange Commission Chairman Jay Clayton is pending.

The reversal brought an immediate and collective sigh of relief, said Samidh Guha, a former assistant U.S. attorney in the office, "as we know continuity will be ensured and none of the office's work will be compromised."

Strauss, according to colleagues in the legal community, has never sought the spotlight but possesses the experience and acumen to guide the office through such an extraordinarily chaotic moment while upholding its long-standing tradition of independence in important public corruption matters. Berman, in his statement Saturday agreeing not to prolong the fight with Barr, made clear his belief that the office of more than 200 attorneys could be "in no better hands" than those of his handpicked deputy.

Those who know Strauss said that they believe the changeover will be relatively seamless and that she'll continue to fight against political misconduct.

Over the past two years, Strauss was part of several politically sensitive cases infiltrating Trump's orbit, including the tax fraud and campaign finance case brought against the president's former lawyer Michael Cohen. An investigation of Trump's current lawyer, Rudolph W. Giuliani, has been a source of aggravation for the president.

Joon Kim, who preceded Berman as an interim U.S. attorney and formerly held the same deputy position from which Strauss was just promoted, said she would be devoted to the

most touchy of cases because she would have been "actively" involved in those matter since becoming deputy in February 2018. "I would expect that she was very much involved in all of the important cases in the office," Kim said.

Paul Shechtman, a former federal prosecutor in Manhattan who worked with Strauss, predicted she would not "wilt" if faced with pressure to abandon cases viewed unfavorably by the president or the attorney general.

"She grew up in that office," Shechtman said, of the Southern District of New York, where he and Strauss were contemporaries during the 1980s. "The traditions of that office are embedded in her, and one of those traditions is a fierce sense of independence and a sense that one follows the evidence, doesn't rush to judgment, but isn't afraid to make judgments even if they might be politically inconvenient."

Barr's critics have suggested his attempt to bring in Craig Carpenito, the U.S. attorney in New Jersey, was motivated by a desire to curtail the New York office's independent streak. A Justice Department spokeswoman did not respond Sunday to questions seeking clarity as to why the attorney general initially passed over Strauss.

It's unclear how long Strauss will remain in the role, as Clayton's nomination to take over the job may already be in trouble. On Saturday, Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.), chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, signaled he would honor the "blue slip" veto system granting home-state senators a say in whose nomination proceeds. The move probably seals Clayton's fate, as neither Democratic senator from New York is expected to acquiesce.

While Graham may come under pressure from corners of the Republican Party to reverse his decision, it is unlikely Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) would take steps to force the issue. Extraordinary measures to circumvent the committee are an even unlikelier option, as it would take 60 votes — meaning all Republicans plus seven Democrats — to pull a nominee out of the committee's jurisdiction and straight to a floor vote, and Democrats are all but universally opposed to Clayton's confirmation.

Graham, one of Trump's closest allies, issued a statement Saturday expressing that he, too, had confidence in Strauss, saying he believed she would run the office "in a professional and ethical manner."

Danya Perry was a senior trial attorney and deputy chief of the criminal division in the U.S. attorney's office in Manhattan during her tenure there from 2002 to 2013. She knows Strauss socially and through professional networks and believes she will "doggedly pursue" existing investigations, no matter how delicate. Strauss, Perry said, is "uniformly viewed as following the cases, doing the right things for the right reasons."

[Russia] Large-scale Russian treaty violations revealed on eve of new talks (Washington Times)

Washington Times [6/21/2020 9:16 PM, Bill Gertz, 496K, Neutral]

The Trump administration revealed on the eve of new arms talks with Russia nine major arms control agreement compliance failures by Moscow.

Special U.S. arms control envoy Marshall Billingslea said the sole positive finding in the forthcoming State Department annual report on arms compliance is Moscow's adherence to the terms of the 2010 New START.

However, Mr. Billingslea said extending the treaty, set to expire in February, remains uncertain.

"This year's arms control report documents Russia's abysmal track record in complying with its promises," Mr. Billingslea told The Washington Times.

"These aren't trivial arms control violations," he said. "These are invasions of countries, assassination attempts and blowing up a 30-year-plus treaty through its violations."

The State Department report, set for release as early as Monday, identifies violations and failures by the Russians to live up to arms accords in nine different agreements.

The violations over more than decade include the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty that banned medium-range, ground-based missiles. Russia secretly built and deployed the SSC-8 ground-based nuclear missile in violation of the INF Treaty, prompting the Trump administration to announce last year that it was pulling out of the accord.

The report also addresses U.S. "concerns with Russia's activities related to its commitments under the Biological Weapons Convention," a senior State Department official said.

Violations of the Vienna Document, part of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, include Russian stationing forces in Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the report says.

Moscow is violating the 1975 Helsinki Final Act by arming and training anti-government forces fighting in Eastern Ukraine, the report notes.

The Conventional Forces in Europe agreement is being violated by Russia's stationing of military forces in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine without those nations' consent.

The Open Skies Treaty allowing military overflights was violated by Moscow by its blocking of flights near the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and Ossetia, the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad on the Baltic Sea, and observation of the large-scale TSENTR 2019 military exercise.

The report discloses how Russia covertly developed the SSC-8 cruise missile and had begun the development by the mid- to late 2000s.

"That means Russia was consciously breaking [the INF] for a decade or more," the senior official said, noting that "multiple battalions" of the missile are deployed today.

On nuclear testing, the report identifies Russian experiments that have produced nuclear yields in contravention of Moscow's claim to be observing a moratorium on nuclear testing.

"This year's arms control report documents Russia's abysmal track record in complying with its promises," said the senior official, who is familiar with the report.

If Russia failed to notify the United States of its intent to conduct certain nuclear experiments that created a self-sustaining reaction, it could constitute a violation under the Threshold Test Ban Treaty, the official said.

On the 2010 Peaceful Nuclear Initiative (PNI), the report for the first time discloses that Russia is not adhering to all of its commitments on the peaceful application of nuclear technology.

"Russia no longer feels bound by its PNI pledge to eliminate and cease production of all nuclear warheads for the ground forces," the report states.

Of Russia's arms control treaty commitments, only the New START is being complied with, according to the report.

The senior official said the reason Russia has complied with New START is because the treaty does not constrain Moscow's nuclear buildup. For example, tactical nuclear warheads and short-range nuclear missiles are not included in the treaty.

New START also does cover many of the strategic weapons being developed and thus there is little reason for Russia to violate the treaty, the official said.

The poor record of arms compliance is a key reason that any new treaties and agreements will include effective verification, such as on-site verification, and short-notice inspections.

"This is why restoring effective verification as a bedrock of arms control is a precondition for future agreements that must cover both Russia and China," the senior official said.

Mr. Billingslea arrived in Vienna over the weekend with a delegation of about a dozen American security officials, including a senior officer from the Strategic Command, who will meet Monday with a group of Russian arms experts led by Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov.

The talks are scheduled to end Tuesday.

The question of China joining the arms talks is up in the air. Last week, Mr. Billingslea tweeted that there is growing pressure on China to join the talks.

"We'll assess way ahead [on arms control] based on how constructive the Vienna talks are on unconstrained warheads, verification, and China's crash nuclear program," he said.

"World wants China to be transparent, esp. after COVID-19. Stop China's secretive crash nuclear program," Mr. Billingslea said in an earlier tweet.

A Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman told reporters in Beijing last week that Beijing will not join the Vienna arms talks.

All options are "on the table" regarding a New START extension, Mr. Billingslea said. The options are said to include renewing the existing accord, modifying the treaty with stronger verification provisions, or allowing the treaty to lapse and seeking a new three-way treaty with China.

"The Vienna meetings are an opportunity for Russia to explain why it so desperately wants [an] extension of New START," Mr. Billingslea said. "And we stand to be persuaded."

Mr. Ryabkov, the Russian deputy foreign minister, told The National Interest that Moscow sees "a downward spiral" in arms control that he blamed on the U.S. government.

"It looks like America doesn't believe in arms control as a concept altogether," Mr. Ryabkov said. "Instead, it tries to find pretexts to depart from as many arms control treaties, agreements, and arrangements that Russia is also a party to. This is very regrettable."

The New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) cut U.S. and Russian stockpiles to 1,550 deployed warheads.

However, Russia in recent years has been building several new strategic weapons, many of which are not covered by New START.

The new weapons include the Sarmat heavy intercontinental ballistic missile, an air-launched ballistic missile, a hypersonic glider, a nuclear-powered cruise missile and a drone submarine armed with a megaton-class warhead.

One of the most significant new arms compliance failures was Moscow's use of a military nerve agent in a 2018 covert intelligence operation to assassinate a Russian defector living in Britain. The operation is outlined in the annual compliance report as well as a separate report on specific issues related to the 1997 Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC).

The report concludes that Moscow's use of the nerve agent was a violation of commitments not to use chemical arms.

"The United States certifies that Russia is in noncompliance with the CWC for its use of a military-grade nerve agent in an assassination attempt on U.K. soil," states the 20-page report known, as Condition 10 (C), that is required annually by Congress.

The violation is related to the attempted assassination of Russian defector Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in Salisbury, England, in 2018.

Mr. Skripal, a former Russian military officer who worked as a double agent for Britain, was targeted by a Russian military intelligence hit team that used a military-grade nerve agent called novichok to try to kill him.

Mr. Skripal, his daughter and a police investigator who was stricken by the nerve agent survived. One person who came into contact with the poisoning device died after finding the device in a garbage bin.

"This attack indicates Russia retains an undeclared chemical weapons program," the report

said.

Russia has denied any involvement in the Skripal poisoning.

However, in response to the operation by Russia's GRU military intelligence service, President Trump, in coordination with U.S. allies, ordered the expulsion of 48 Russian intelligence officers from the United States in March 2018.

The report said scientists in the former Soviet Union developed the nerve agent used in the attack as a fourth-generation weapon called "novichoks."

"It is highly likely these agents were developed to prevent detection by the West and circumvent international chemical weapons controls," the report said.

[Russia] US, Russia arms talks start with little hope of accord (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [6/21/2020 8:54 PM, Staff, 12818K, Neutral]

The United States and Russia meet Monday in Vienna for talks on their last major nuclear weapons agreement against a backdrop of growing tensions and differences over whether they see any value in arms control at all.

US President Donald Trump insists that China should be involved in the talks on New START, the treaty that caps US and Russian nuclear warheads, because he says up until now Beijing has had a free pass to do as it likes in developing its weapon systems.

China has shown no sign of being interested, giving Washington fresh cause for complaint, although critics say Washington finds that a useful stick with which to beat its growing rival.

Daryl Kimball, executive director of the Washington-based Arms Control Association, said the insistence on including China showed the Trump administration was not serious about an accord.

"The only conclusion I can come to is that... the Trump administration (does) not intend to extend New START and is seeking to display China's disinterest in trilateral arms control talks as a cynical excuse to allow New START to expire," Kimball said.

Trump has already scrapped several treaties with Russia -- on overflights and on intermediate-range nuclear forces.

US ambassador Marshall Billingslea and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov are nonetheless to discuss the future of the New START treaty, which was agreed in 2010 and expires in February 2021.

That leaves very little time to renew a complex deal, let alone negotiate a new treaty involving China, especially with a November presidential election looming.

The current treaty limits each side to 1,550 deployed nuclear warheads.

- End of agreements? -

China's nuclear arsenal is rapidly expanding but is still far smaller than those of the US and Russia.

Speaking over the weekend, Ryabkov played down prospects when he said that while it would be "correct and logical" to agree an extension, the future of the world was not solely dependent on it.

The deadlock over New START and the demise of other nuclear arms control treaties "suggest that the era of bilateral nuclear arms control agreements between Russia and the USA might be coming to an end," said Shannon Kile of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

According to the institute's latest research, Russia has 6,375 nuclear warheads, including those that are not deployed, and the United States has 5,800.

China comes a distant third with 320 warheads.

Song Zhongping, a defence analyst in Beijing, said 2,000 warheads would be an ideal arsenal for China, whose main concern is to counter the United States.

"China will never participate in nuclear disarmament negotiations between the US and Russia," he said.

"The nuclear disarmament talks proposed by the US are only a trap."

Russian political analyst Fyodor Lukyanov said there was no reason to expect any progress in Vienna.

"The Trump administration has rejected nearly all the restraints linked to the treaties agreed in the past," Lukyanov said.

"There is nothing to suggest that this treaty will be the exception."

[China] Trump Says He Avoided Punishing China Over Uighur Camps to Protect Trade Talks (New York Times)

New York Times [6/21/2020 10:49 PM, Michael Crowley, 40577K, Negative]

President Trump said he resisted punishing China for its mass internment of ethnic Uighurs last year for fear of jeopardizing trade talks with Beijing, a blunt admission of his transactional approach to human rights and willingness to subordinate other U.S. policy priorities to a potential trade deal he considers vital to his re-election.

In an interview with Axios published on Sunday, Mr. Trump was asked why he had not approved a Treasury Department plan in late 2018 to impose sanctions on Chinese government officials who were connected to the severe crackdown on China's Uighurs and other Muslim minorities.

"Well, we were in the middle of a major trade deal," Mr. Trump said.

"And when you're in the middle of a negotiation and then all of a sudden you start throwing additional sanctions on — we've done a lot," he added. "I put tariffs on China, which are far worse than any sanction you can think of."

Mr. Trump has taken a selective approach to human rights as president, imposing sanctions over rights abuses in countries he aims to intimidate, like Iran and Venezuela, while turning a largely blind eye when it comes to an ally like Saudi Arabia, or in the case of China, where he hopes to strike a trade deal. After he began to pursue a nuclear deal with North Korea, Mr. Trump abruptly dropped his criticisms of that country's infamous human rights abuses.

His comment to Axios, part of an interview he gave Friday, appeared to support the account of his former national security adviser John R. Bolton, who writes in a new book that Mr. Trump asked him in December 2018 why administration officials were considering sanctions on Chinese officials over their treatment of the Uighurs.

Mr. Trump never approved the idea, and the issue was kept out of the trade talks entirely. And in a meeting several months later with President Xi Jinping of China, Mr. Bolton writes, "Trump said that Xi should go ahead with building the camps, which Trump thought was exactly the right thing to do."

U.S. officials and human rights groups say that China has placed up to one million Uighurs in indoctrination camps in the country's northwestern Xinjiang region and turned the area into a dystopian surveillance state. Beijing has claimed that its policies are aimed at curbing extremism and that people in the camps, which it calls vocational training centers, are there voluntarily.

Ample evidence, including leaked Chinese government documents, proves otherwise, and former detainees have alleged rape, medical experiments and torture. Human Rights Watch has condemned abuse in the camps as "horrific."

Chinese officials angrily challenge foreign criticism of their treatment of Uighurs as unacceptable interference in the country's internal affairs. They lashed out at the United States last week after Mr. Trump, with little fanfare, signed legislation granting him new powers to impose sanctions on Chinese officials involved in the roundup of Uighurs.

Congress passed that measure this spring in large part to pressure Mr. Trump after he failed to take unilateral action already within his power.

As the scale of China's crackdown became clear in 2018, officials at the Trump White House and the Treasury Department — with bipartisan support in Congress — discussed imposing sanctions on Chinese officials and companies with a hand in the crackdown on the Uighurs. But U.S. officials said last year that the idea was dropped to avoid interfering with what Mr. Trump has said could be "the biggest deal ever made."

In a "Phase 1" trade deal signed in January, China made pledges to open up its financial sector, strengthen its protections of intellectual property and purchase \$200 billion of additional American goods by the end of next year.

But the truce ushered in by that deal has been short-lived. In addition to rising tensions over a new security measure governing Hong Kong and the origin of the coronavirus, the pandemic has crushed consumer demand and disrupted supply chains, leaving those promised purchases lagging far behind targets.

While some of Mr. Trump's advisers believe he has little to gain politically from scrapping his signature trade deal, the president's dissatisfaction with China is growing. That raises the question of whether the United States would challenge China's compliance with the pact or take further action in retaliation for Beijing's crackdown on protesters in Hong Kong.

On Sunday, China temporarily suspended poultry imports from a U.S. slaughterhouse that had coronavirus cases among its workers, though the World Health Organization has found no evidence that the virus is transmitted through food.

In the interview with Axios, Mr. Trump also said he would "maybe think about" a meeting with the Venezuelan president, Nicolás Maduro, whom Mr. Trump has spent years trying to push from office. "Maduro would like to meet. And I'm never opposed to meetings — you know, rarely opposed to meetings," Mr. Trump said.

[China] Trump says he held off Xinjiang sanctions due to trade talks: Axios interview (Reuters)

Reuters [6/21/2020 8:13 PM, Matt Spetalnick, 5304K, Neutral]

President Donald Trump held off on imposing tougher sanctions on Chinese officials blamed for a crackdown on China's Uighur Muslim minority because of concern such measures would have interfered with trade negotiations with Beijing, he said in an interview published on Sunday.

"Well, we were in the middle of a major trade deal. And I made a great deal, \$250 billion potentially worth of purchases," Trump was quoted as telling Axios on Friday when asked why he had not enacted Treasury sanctions against Communist Party officials linked to repression in the Xinjiang region.

The United Nations estimates that more than a million Muslims have been detained in camps there. The State Department has accused China of subjecting Muslims to torture and abuse.

China has denied mistreatment and says the camps provide vocational training and help fight extremism.

U.S. officials previously told Reuters that since late 2018 they had weighed sanctions against Chinese officials over Xinjiang but refrained because of trade and diplomatic considerations.

Under a Phase 1 trade deal negotiated in 2019 that took effect in February, China agreed to buy at least \$200 billion in additional U.S. goods and services over two years.

Former national security adviser John Bolton alleges in a new book that Trump sought Chinese President Xi Jinping's help to win re-election during a 2019 meeting by making

agricultural purchases, and Trump also encouraged Xi to go ahead with building camps in Xinjiang.

Trump has denied the accusations.

The United States since last year has placed import restrictions on some Chinese companies and visa bans on unnamed Chinese officials linked to Xinjiang but has not imposed harsher Treasury sanctions.

Trump signed legislation last Wednesday calling for sanctions over Xinjiang, drawing threats of retaliation from China. He insisted, however, he had discretion to decide any application of the measures.

[China] U.S. Rejects Additional Flights Sought by Chinese Airlines (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [6/22/2020 12:03 AM, Ryan Beene, Neutral]

U.S. officials rejected additional flights proposed by Chinese airlines but said they would reconsider if the Beijing government adjusts its policies affecting American passenger carriers.

In a statement late Friday, the Transportation Department said it disapproved service schedules submitted by four China-based carriers that are currently allowed to make four combined flights to the U.S. each week, plus additional proposals submitted by three other Chinese carriers.

The department said the action was "effectively an administrative action designed to maintain the parity in scheduled passenger services between U.S. and Chinese carriers" that it announced earlier this week.

American officials have relayed to their counterparts in Beijing that the move is a "procedural matter only and that it should not be viewed as an escalation on our part," the Transportation Department said.

The department added that it "continues to indicate our willingness to revisit our action should the Chinese aviation authorities adjust their policies to bring about the necessary improved situation for U.S. carriers in which both they and the Chinese carriers could fully exercise their bilateral rights."

Earlier: U.S. Expands Flights from Chinese Airlines to Four Per Week

Representatives from the Civil Aviation Administration of China and three of the carriers currently operating scheduled passenger services to the U.S. -- Air China Ltd., China Southern Airlines Co. and China Eastern Airlines Corp. -- didn't immediately respond to requests for comment. A representative for Xiamen Airlines Co., which operates a weekly round-trip flight from the southeast Chinese city to Los Angeles, wasn't available for comment.

Air China's Hong Kong-listed shares fell 1.4% Monday morning, while China Southern was down 1.9% and China Eastern dropped 1.7%.

The balance allowing four flights to the U.S. was struck in recent weeks and came after weeks of diplomatic wrangling on passenger flights between the two nations when the Trump administration doubled the number of operations permitted to and from the U.S. by China-based carriers.

The U.S. had earlier threatened to cut off all flights from China if the Beijing government didn't stop blocking American carriers. Three U.S. airlines, which had halted flights to China earlier this year because of the Covid-19 pandemic, wanted to resume service. But both sides have gradually expanded the number of flights.

[Japan] Fire burning at hazmat facility at US air base on Okinawa (AP)

AP [6/22/2020 3:00 AM, Mari Yamaguchi, Neutral]

A fire was burning Monday in a storage building for hazardous materials at a major U.S. air base on Japan's southern island of Okinawa, the U.S. military said.

The blaze began Monday morning at the building in the central part of Kadena Air Base and was still burning a few hours later, but it was contained within the base's perimeter, according to a U.S. Air Force statement.

Footage on Japanese television showed thick gray plumes of smoke billowing from the building, called the 18th wing Hazardous Materials Pharmacy. The area was closed off and personnel in the area have been evacuated as firefighters get the fire under control, the statement said. It said no injuries have been reported. The cause of the fire is unknown, the statement said. Kadena is the largest U.S. air base in the Far East.

More than half of about 50,000 U.S. troops in Japan are stationed on Okinawa under a bilateral security pact. Many residents on Okinawa have long complained about environmental hazard, noise and crime related to the base.

Environmental impact of what happens at U.S. bases has been a major concern on Okinawa. In April, more than 140 tons of fire-fighting foams believed to contain cancer-causing substances leaked out of the Marine Air Station Futenma at the center of a relocation dispute. The Defense Ministry last month said its water sampling results showed no major problems.

[Afghanistan] Coronavirus: UN condemns Afghan healthcare attacks amid pandemic (Yahoo News/BBC)

Yahoo News/BBC [6/21/2020 5:11 PM, Staff, 12818K, Negative]

The UN has condemned continued attacks against Afghan health workers and facilities amid the spread of Covid-19.

In a statement, the UN envoy to Afghanistan said both Afghan forces and the Taliban were responsible for "deliberate acts of violence that undermined healthcare operations."

Her comments follow the release of a report into ongoing violence in Afghanistan during the pandemic.

The violence includes an attack on a maternity unit which left 24 dead.

Newborns, mothers and nurses were all killed after militants stormed the facility in the capital Kabul on May 12. No group has yet claimed responsibility for the attack.

It was one of 15 attacks that the report notes took place between 11 March — when the World Health Organization declared coronavirus a global pandemic — to the beginning of a three-day ceasefire between the Taliban and the Afghan government on 23 May.

Of these, the Taliban were responsible for 10 incidents, including eight in which facilities were deliberately targeted.

Three other targeted attacks were attributed to Afghan security forces.

A further healthcare facility was damaged during clashes between the two sides, the report said.

"The range and scale of deliberate attacks on healthcare in Afghanistan at a time when the country was confronted by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic is of grave concern," the report, which was released by the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) on Sunday, said.

"When an urgent humanitarian response was required to protect the lives of all individuals in Afghanistan, both sides were responsible for both targeted and accidental damage to health care facilities."

Coronavirus fears

So far, almost 29,000 coronavirus cases and 581 deaths have been recorded in Afghanistan, according to Johns Hopkins University.

But while the numbers appear low, the country has limited access to testing and the health system has suffered under decades of conflict.

Around 200,000 Afghans returned from neighbouring countries in March, the majority from Iran, which was particularly hard hit by the pandemic.

In addition to the pressure the conflict has placed on civilians during the pandemic, a report published by Save The Children in May found that seven million Afghan children were at risk of hunger as a result of a rise in food prices due to Covid-19.

[Venezuela] Trump says he would consider meeting Venezuelas Maduro but has 'turned them down': Axios (Reuters)

Reuters [6/21/2020 8:48 PM, Matt Spetalnick, 5304K, Neutral]

President Donald Trump said in an interview published on Sunday that he would consider meeting Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and played down his earlier decision to recognize opposition leader Juan Guaido as the country's legitimate leader.

"I would maybe think about that. ... Maduro would like to meet. And I'm never opposed to meetings," Trump told online news site Axios on Friday, a move that would upend his "maximum pressure" campaign aimed at ousting the Socialist president.

"But at this moment, I've turned them down," Trump added.

Trump had expressed an openness in 2018 to meeting Maduro, who had also made overtures for talks, but nothing materialized and the United States instead ratcheted up the pressure.

But Trump's latest comments were possibly the clearest sign yet of what some U.S. officials have privately said was growing frustration over his administration's failure to unseat Maduro through sanctions and diplomacy.

Trump also indicated flagging confidence in Guaidó. The United States and most other Western countries have recognized Guaidó as the OPEC nation's interim president since January last year, regarding Maduro's 2018 re-election as a sham.

But Maduro has retained the support of the military as well as the backing of Russia, Cuba, China and Iran.

Asked whether he regretted having thrown his weight behind Guaidó, Trump was quoted by Axios as initially saying: "Not particularly," but then went on to say: "I could have lived with it or without it, but I was very firmly against what's going on in Venezuela."

Trump said that at the point he made his decision, "I think that I wasn't necessarily in favor, but I said — some people that liked it, some people didn't. I was OK with it. ... I don't think it was very meaningful one way or the other."

[Venezuela] Trump cold on Guaidó, would consider meeting Maduro (Axios)

Axios [6/21/2020 6:05 PM, Jonathan Swan, 526K, Neutral]

In an Oval Office interview with Axios on Friday, President Trump suggested he's had second thoughts about his decision to recognize Juan Guaidó as the legitimate leader of Venezuela and said he is open to meeting with dictator Nicolás Maduro.

Asked whether he would meet with Maduro, Trump said, "I would maybe think about that. ... Maduro would like to meet. And I'm never opposed to meetings — you know, rarely opposed to meetings.

"I always say, you lose very little with meetings. But at this moment, I've turned them down."

Trump also indicated he doesn't have much confidence in Guaidó, who has failed to wrest control of the Venezuelan government despite support from the U.S. and dozens of other countries.

Asked whether he regretted his decision to follow his former national security adviser John Bolton's advice on Guaidó, Trump initially said "not particularly," but then went on to say, "I could have lived with it or without it, but I was very firmly against what's going on in

Venezuela."

Trump said that at the point he weighed in and recognized Guaidó, "Guaidó was elected. I think that I wasn't necessarily in favor, but I said — some people that liked it, some people didn't. I was OK with it. I don't think it was — you know, I don't think it was very meaningful one way or the other."

If Trump meets with Maduro, it would completely upend his administration's policy on Venezuela. Top administration officials, including Vice President Pence and Secretary of State Pompeo, have invested a huge amount of energy in supporting Guaidó.

And in March, Attorney General Bill Barr announced that the Justice Department was charging Maduro with narcoterrorism. The DOJ press release announcing the charges referred to him as the "Former President of Venezuela."

Behind the scenes: A former Trump administration official told me Trump's comments to Axios tracked with their firsthand experience of the first two and a half years of his presidency, when Venezuela policy was a hotter issue in the West Wing than it is now.

In 2017, the Venezuelan government reached out to the White House and the State Department at least twice to express Maduro's willingness to meet with Trump, the former official said.

In one of these instances, the Venezuelan Embassy called the White House switchboard. The other request came in a letter. Maduro also publicly expressed his desire to meet with Trump.

The former official said it was a "recurring concern" inside the administration during 2017 and 2018 that Trump would meet with Maduro. "It was really stop and go there for a while," he said. "And the Venezuelan opposition was beside themselves."

The president signaled a general openness to meeting Maduro in 2018, but also reiterated that "all options" were on the table — a signal he was considering military action against Venezuela.

In his book, "The Room Where It Happened," Bolton writes this of Trump's private feelings about Guaidó, after throwing the full diplomatic weight of the U.S. government behind him:

"He thought Guaidó was 'weak,' as opposed to Maduro, who was 'strong.'"

"By spring, Trump was calling Guaidó the 'Beto O'Rourke of Venezuela,' hardly the sort of compliment an ally of the United States should expect."

"It was far from helpful but typical of how Trump carelessly defamed those around him, as when he began blaming me for the opposition's failure to overthrow Maduro."

In Axios' interview, Trump described his former national security adviser as a "nutjob" who may be the "dumbest human being on Earth" for persistently supporting the Iraq War

Editorials and Op-eds

China's Art of War in Sri Lanka (The National Interest)

The National Interest [6/21/2020 7:18 PM, Patrick Mendis, Dominique Reichenbach, 12818K, Neutral]

Sri Lanka received another round of Chinese-made face masks and medical equipment to combat the coronavirus in mid-June, which is further evidence that Sri Lanka is a major target of Beijing's foreign policy and "donation diplomacy."

China's continued Indo-Pacific expansion and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) promotion, culminating in the launching the "Health Silk Road," have caused a swell in U.S.-China tensions. Sri Lanka, referred to as an important piece of "real estate" by U.S. Ambassador Alice Wells for its strategic location in the Indian Ocean along major maritime shipping routes, has been a flashpoint for these New Cold War-causing tensions over recent months.

China's amplified efforts to bolster relations with Sri Lanka have shifted the global order and left the United States grasping for straws to maintain its global prestige and relationship with the island nation.

Escalating Tensions and Playing Political Favorites

Prior to 2019, Sri Lanka's administration was pro-Washington and favored striking political deals with the United States. For example, in 2017 the pro-American Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration happily renewed its Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) with the United States for another ten years. The ACSA allowed the transfer and exchange of logistics supplies, support, and refueling services which benefited U.S. military operations in the Indo-Pacific region.

A mere two years later, however, the pro-Beijing Gotabaya Rajapaksa administration has refused to cooperate with U.S. initiatives, exemplifying that Sri Lanka is now actively choosing a partnership with China instead of the United States. Recently, the United States failed to renew its Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with Sri Lanka, even after pledging \$480 million in development aid via the Millennium Challenge Compact (MCC). The United States and Sri Lanka spent months debating the MCC compact which promised infrastructure development projects, much like China's BRI projects within Sri Lanka's borders; however, the Colombo administration ultimately declined to sign the strings-attached MCC offer and refused to renew the SOFA.

The SOFA negotiations instigated some political tension and debate amongst Sri Lanka's political class who called the SOFA a "very serious infringement on the country's sovereignty." In the wake of these June 2019 tensions, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo canceled a trip to Sri Lanka during his tour of the Indo-Pacific region. Though the US claimed the cancellation came due to "scheduling conflicts," many Sri Lankans speculated that it had more to do with rising local anti-American sentiments as the US attempted to establish a new military base in Sri Lanka as part of its, now failed, SOFA agreements. In retrospect, it seems that this trip cancellation and rising local sentiments against American influence in Sri Lanka foreshadowed the decline in U.S.-Sri Lankan partnership in favor of

China.

Money Makes the World Go 'Round

It is no wonder that Sri Lanka has shifted its alliance, as the coronavirus proved that China has the undeniable power of the purse. After the outbreak of the coronavirus in Sri Lanka, the Colombo administration sent an urgent request to the Chinese government for foreign aid to manage its current financial debts and combat the virus.

Just days later, the Chinese government responded by extending a ten-year \$500 million concessionary loan to Sri Lanka, stating that the two countries have enjoyed a "long history of friendship" and that the Chinese government is committed to "continuously providing necessary assistance to the Sri Lankan government and people within our capacities for the country's economic and social development."

In addition to the concessionary loan, China has also provided several plane loads of medical supplies to Sri Lanka, the most recent being in early June, as well as a detailed report on the measures China took to control the spread of the coronavirus.

In comparison, to help Sri Lanka mitigate the pandemic crisis, the United States only provided a \$5.8 million grant, a tiny fraction of the Chinese \$500 million commitment. Juxtaposed against China's overgenerous donation diplomacy, it appears that there is virtually no benefit for Sri Lanka to choose a partnership with the United States in place of China, suggesting that Beijing is successfully shifting the world order.

New Partnerships

Sri Lanka became famous for exemplifying the dangers of the BRI and its "debt-trap diplomacy" tendencies when it surrendered the Hambantota port and fifteen thousand acres to China for ninety-nine years in 2017, giving China a strategic foothold along major commercial shipping routes.

Despite this "debt trap," Sri Lanka's BRI partnership with China has only continued to flourish. Days ago, Sri Lanka and China established the "China-Sri Lanka Belt and Road Political Parties Joint Consultation Mechanism," which met for the first time on June 11, 2020.

The meeting confirmed that the "Communist Party of China stands ready to cooperate with political parties of Sri Lanka to promote bilateral cooperation" and promised "exchanges on governance" to expand BRI cooperation and economic development. At the meeting, Sri Lankan political leaders emphasized their "deep feelings" and gratitude towards China for its valuable epidemic prevention support and economic development initiatives.

Amidst the backdrop of the coronavirus, it is clear that China has maintained an agenda of vying for international leadership to the detriment of both the United States' global reputation and U.S.-China relations. Remembering the Sun Tzu quote, "If an enemy has alliances, the problem is grave and the enemy's position strong; if he has no alliances, the problem is minor and the enemy's position weak," it seems that China has taken to

weakening strategic U.S. alliances throughout the Indo-Pacific region, most notably in Sri Lanka.

Rules for Clinical Trials in a Pandemic (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [6/21/2020 4:20 PM, Scott Gottlieb and Mark McClellan, Neutral]

A new study finds that adding a simple steroid to the treatment of severe Covid-19 cases can significantly reduce deaths. That's another milestone in the battle against the virus. It shows a path for reducing Covid deaths faster through medical innovation and for keeping the health-care system from being overwhelmed as the epidemic spreads.

The U.S., unlike Europe and Asia, seems to have decided not to crush the virus but try to reduce its spread to a controllable level. The 30,000 cases diagnosed each day probably represent no more than 20% of the total infections. It's a lot of virus, but mostly manageable, for now. It won't stay that way.

Death rates are down, partly because older Americans are protecting themselves. More new infections are among younger people less likely to have bad outcomes. But come fall it will be hard to keep infection rates down and isolate older Americans and those with serious health risks. Covid spread will collide with seasonal flu.

The novel coronavirus won't simply disappear. By virtue of its biological features, we can expect it to infect about 60% of a population before receding—still a long way off. Effective vaccines would stop it, but until that happens, the best bet is for most Americans to heed practical measures to reduce risk for themselves and close contacts, while physicians use innovative methods to mitigate severe cases and shorten hospitals stays.

Which brings us to the new study on the steroid. The preliminary report from a British trial called Recovery is that dexamethasone can reduce death rates by a third among Covid patients requiring mechanical ventilation and 20% in those needing oxygen. The finding came from one of the world's largest continuing randomized, controlled trials for coronavirus treatments. Conducted in hospitals across the U.K., Recovery enrolled more than 11,000 patients randomized to receive usual care or one of six possibly effective treatments. It's continuing to enroll more patients and test more treatments at a much faster pace than smaller trials.

Recovery, an acronym for Randomised Evaluation of Covid-19 Therapy, is a model for learning faster about what works. It's a practical trial that assigns patients to different treatments at random, with data collection limited to the most important measures of disease severity and outcomes, making participation easier. The protocols of trials in the U.S. are more elaborate, which means less enrollment and results take longer.

Public-health authorities in the U.S. aren't supporting the Recovery model, viewing it as insufficiently rigorous because it didn't collect information on all of the variables that could influence outcomes. But complex studies are often impractical in the setting of an epidemic, where clinicians are hard pressed to carve out time from crisis medical care to track and record hundreds of required variables. The British approach makes it manageable to learn what works in many more hospitals.

The Food and Drug Administration recently took steps to expand the use of real-world evidence—derived from electronic data on the treatments and outcomes of the rising number of Covid patients—to help assess other drugs such as blood thinners and plasma derived from recovered patients. But without randomized trials, it's hard to determine what works. Thousands of hospitalized patients received hydroxychloroquine before randomized trials revealed that it didn't help. Thousands have received convalescent plasma. While this seems to help, no one is sure.

In the 1980s, straightforward trials enrolling large numbers of acutely ill heart-attack patients helped drive down heart-attack deaths. It's now even easier to capture this kind of data electronically. More-detailed randomized studies like those in the National Institutes of Health trial network are also necessary, especially for new drugs, and can complement expanded practical studies.

Some existing U.S. clinical trial networks have tools that other hospitals could adopt to participate. Health-care payers like Medicare should pay a little more for evidence collection when they do; it's more efficient than continuing to pay for treatments like hydroxychloroquine without knowing whether they work. The same larger networks could also expand the evidence available on new drugs such as the antiviral remdesivir—whether the length or timing of treatment matters, for example.

The U.S. appears consigned to high Covid case levels and health-care systems that will continue to be under threat. We owe it to all of the patients who will be hospitalized to use this unfortunate reality to help providers make the best treatment decisions possible.

How to Prepare for the Coronavirus's Impact on Terrorism (The National Interest)

The National Interest [6/21/2020 7:22 PM, Nikita Malik, 12818K, Neutral]

Following 9/11, President George W. Bush framed the challenge facing the United States as thus: "Our nation has been put on notice: We are not immune from attack." Over a decade and a half later, in 2017, then-UK foreign secretary Boris Johnson described the global effort against radical Islam as "a fight not against a military opponent but against a disease or psychosis." As these two examples show, the use of medicinal language to describe the war against terrorism has been a common theme in speeches of leaders in the United States and the UK.

Yet recent statistics produced by New York City health officials have revealed that the number of people dying because of the coronavirus in NYC has already surpassed the number who were killed in the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Both terrorist attacks and pandemics are high-impact events that have the ability to disrupt lives. Perhaps one of the most interesting ways to examine this disruption is the effect such events have on our data.

In a March 2020 Pew Research Center survey, the American public named the spread of infectious diseases as the greatest threat to the country. For the first time, this surpassed the threat of terrorism: 79 percent of Americans named outbreaks of disease as a major threat to the country, compared to 73 percent of Americans who saw terrorism as a major threat. Counterterrorism measures nonetheless provide an important context for examining the trade-offs between reduced civil liberties and increased security. Following high-impact events such as terrorist attacks, public concerns regarding government intrusions on

privacy tend to decrease. After the terrorist attacks in Paris, France, and San Bernardino, California, in 2015, for example, a national survey by Pew Research Center found that the American public was less concerned that anti-terrorism policies restricted civil liberties: such concerns fell to their lowest level in five years (to 28 percent), with twice as many people (56 percent) stating that their greater concern was that policies had not gone far enough to adequately protect the country.

Similarly, following the 7/7 bombings in the UK in 2005, a Guardian/ICM poll illustrated that 73 percent of Britons would trade civil liberties for security, with only 17 percent rejecting it outright. A more recent survey by YouGov in May 2018 found that Britons would still be willing to trade civil liberties for the purposes of countering terrorism: 67 percent were in favor of monitoring all public spaces in the UK with CCTV cameras, 63 percent were in favor of making it compulsory for every person in the UK to carry an ID card, 64 percent supported keeping a record of every British citizen's fingerprints, and 59 percent supported a DNA database.

Where does our data go, and what is it used for? Data mining, the process of extracting trends from large amounts of data using techniques such as pattern recognition and machine learning, has been used to understand and prevent terrorist activity and fraudulent behavior, often as part of a broader knowledge discovery process. A 2002 op-ed published by The New York Times detailed new plans for a program within the Defense Advanced Research Project Agency (DARPA) to create a centralized database containing information on citizens that could be used to data-mine for various purposes, including security concerns. The article led to the creation of a blue-ribbon committee around privacy concerns, the Technology and Privacy Advisory Committee, and the eventual cancellation of the program.

Similar concerns have been raised in the UK around data retention following the introduction of blanket emergency legislation. Part eleven of the UK Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001, for example, allows for the automated surveillance of the private lives of a proportion of the population by analyzing patterns within their communications. Powers introduced following national crises can, therefore, be deliberately broad, and oversight mechanisms are necessary to protect against their exercise being extended from terrorist investigations to matters involving the wider population. In the UK, some of these concerns have been alleviated by data privacy rules under the European Union's (EU's) General Data Protection Regulation. However, exceptions exist for 'vital interests' (where processing is necessary to protect someone's life).

As countries ease lockdown restrictions imposed in response to the coronavirus, a trade-off for the liberty of free movement may be greater accessibility of civilian data. In at least twenty-three countries, dozens of 'digital contact tracing' apps have been downloaded more than fifty million times. Authorities in the UK and other countries, meanwhile, have deployed drones with video equipment and temperature sensors to track those who have broken lockdown restrictions by being outside their homes. In the United States, a task force of data mining start-ups and technology companies is currently working with the White House to develop a range of tracking and surveillance technologies to fight the coronavirus. Other ideas being considered include geolocation tracking of people using data from their phones, and facial recognition systems to determine who has come into contact with individuals later tested positive for the virus.

Such methods have raised concerns around “surveillance creep,” where intrusive powers are expanded or data is used to prosecute for a range of crimes. Data used to build predictive or preventative computer models around the coronavirus outbreak, therefore, comes with various issues, the most important of which surround privacy and accuracy. Here, past experiences with the collection of data around the prevention of terrorism can offer some lessons learned.

The first lesson is about privacy. An essential aspect of the UK Coronavirus Act 2020, for example, focuses on containing and slowing the virus by reducing unnecessary social contact. The measures it introduces to achieve this represent an erosion of safeguards placed on important and potentially intrusive investigatory powers. One example of data being used to prevent terrorism, which is relevant to privacy concerns around data sharing for the coronavirus, is aviation security. The United States, for instance, uses the Automated Targeted System (ATS), which assesses the comparative risks of arriving passengers. Knowledge discovery techniques within this system have been employed to create risk assessments and to target investigative resources. One example of such data being used to flag a subject of interest—suicide bomber Raed al Banna—who was denied entry to the United States, but whose biometrics and fingerprints were used to later identify him as part of a bomb attack in Iraq. Unlike other data collection methods, however, when it comes to terrorism, data collection often occurs without the knowledge or consent of the data subject.

The second lesson is around accuracy. Unlike arrests that happen in person, artificial algorithms that use large forms of surveillance lack context for the data collected, which may lead to inaccurate inferences. Such potential for false positives and false negatives carries greater risks in the realm of disease control and terrorism prevention than, say, in identifying a shopper's preferences. For example, one way to test for a disease that is able to accurately detect the disease 99 percent of the time, and inaccurately predicts it 1 percent of the time (a false positive). If 0.1 percent of the population has the disease (and the only way to confirm the presence of the disease is with a biopsy) in a population of three hundred million people, three hundred thousand people would have the disease, but ten times that number (nearly three million people) would have to undergo an unnecessary biopsy. In his book *The Naked Crowd*, George Washington University Professor Jeffrey Rosen discusses false-positive rates in a system that might have been designed to identify the nineteen hijackers involved in the 9/11 attacks. Assuming a 99 percent accuracy rate, searching a population of nearly three hundred million (the U.S. population in 2001 was 285 million) would mean approximately three million people would be identified as potential terrorists.

The final lesson is on collaboration. In the future, similar data collection techniques may be employed in the sharing of information between countries on potential individuals who are carrying disease, or who may be at risk due to their travel. Unlike in the context of terrorism, where countries are working to share information against a foreign entity or actor (under United Nations Security Council Resolution 2396, for example), countries will be required to collaborate in order to contain the spread of disease. Concerns around the accuracy of data shared by China and other countries in the early stages of the pandemic, however, raise issues around this initiative, and a new international body may need to ensure that some countries avoid the temptation to coast while hoping that other countries will pick up the

slack. It would also be useful for countries who have employed surveillance techniques to sign a code of practice to ensure that data analysis has sufficient oversight.

[China] Mutual misery society: United States and China suffer alone together (Washington Times)

Washington Times [6/21/2020 2:10 PM, Staff 496K, Neutral]

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's meeting with top Chinese counterparts in Hawaii on Wednesday was held in secret. The list of topics for painstaking dialogue may have been long, but one underlying sentiment likely linked them all: Misery loves company.

The smiles that American and Chinese representatives shared during their earlier confabs began to fade a year ago with the hardening of stances and feelings over trade. Then the novel coronavirus pandemic that erupted in China and spread unchecked across the world turned faces from glum to grim. As a result, hope for a U.S.-China relationship built upon healthy — and fair — competition between the two largest economies has plunged. The mutual willingness for conversation, thankfully, means rock-bottom hasn't loomed into view yet.

Honolulu, the site of the bilateral gathering that brought Mr. Pompeo together with Chinese Communist Party Politburo Member Yang Jiechi, is a long way from the U.S. mainland, but gloom is harder to quarantine than the deadly virus. A matter-of-fact statement from the State Department accompanying the meeting emphasized "the need for fully-reciprocal dealings between the two nations across commercial, security, and diplomatic interactions," but did not include so much as a diplomatic "aloha" for effect.

For good reason, Americans are the most miserable they have been in 50 years. A survey taken by NORC, a research institute at the University of Chicago, found that only 14 percent of American adults said they were very happy. Since the survey began in 1972, the previously smallest proportion who claimed to have a droop-proof smile had been 29 percent.

Sadly, U.S. deaths from COVID-19 have surpassed 120,000, with more than 2.2 million Americans infected — something unimaginable when 2020 dawned. By contrast, mainland China, where the Wuhan virus originated, has lost fewer than 4,700. And while the International Monetary Fund has projected the world economy will contract by 3% this year and a devastating 5.9% in the U.S., China's is expected to expand, albeit by a meager 1.2%.

No one should wish misfortune on fellow human beings, but China's robust success in protecting its own people while not bothering to warn the world of danger has been a bitter pill for Americans to swallow.

Rather than suffer the indignity of apologizing for its failure, cheerless China has attempted to drown out complaints over its culpability for the global pandemic by turning up the volume on its denunciations of U.S. deeds.

Angered by President Trump's finger-pointing at its apparent mishandling of the coronavirus, Beijing has seized upon the recent series of race riots that have swept across the U.S. homeland. These have served as a handy argument that Americans should fix their

own record of racial injustice before mouthing off about persecution of the minority Uighur population locked in detention camps among the Chinese hinterlands.

Undaunted, Mr. Trump in Washington signed the Uighur Human Rights Policy Act, a bill directing the federal government to keep tabs on abuses of the ethnic minority Muslims, as U.S. and Chinese diplomats faced off in Hawaii. China's Foreign Ministry expressed "strong dissatisfaction" with the move, and is likely even less pleased with the president's decision to begin canceling special treatment for Hong Kong in response to Beijing's plans to impose national security rules on the autonomous former British colony. At least Mr. Pompeo refrained to drumming "Wipeout" on the negotiating table with his lunch-time chopsticks.

The Chinese diplomatic pot doesn't need more stirring, but former Trump National Security Adviser John Bolton has dug in uninvited. In a tell-all book excerpted prior to publication, Mr. Bolton claims the president asked China for help in strengthening economic ties in order to win re-election in 2020. Fact or fiction, the allegation alone could have the effect of widening the U.S.-China rift as both nations take measures to disprove the existence of any self-serving deal-making.

In the meantime, Chinese military jets act out official anger by buzzing ships in the Taiwan Straits. And by blowing up a Korean reunification building, loyal wingman Kim Jong-un of North Korea has shown his fellow authoritarians that he feels their pain. Like pathogens, frowns are contagious.

Misery may love company, but so does good cheer. When the pestilence passes, there is reason for hope that the U.S.-China blues will lift.

[China] China Faces a Rice Bowl Dilemma After Covid (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [6/21/2020 6:00 PM, Clara Ferreira Marques, 6400K, Neutral]

Empty supermarket shelves in the early stages of the coronavirus pandemic have put grow-your-own back on the world's agenda, and nowhere more so than in China, where ensuring food supplies for its huge population has been a political priority for decades. Simply diversifying imports may not satisfy hawkish voices. Emphasizing domestic production, though, will extract a heavy toll for a country with a fifth of the globe's people, but roughly a 10th of arable land and less than 6% of water resources.

For a nation scarred by famine, it's hard to overstate the importance of food security. That was true long before 1994, when U.S. environmental pioneer Lester Brown drew international attention to the potential consequences of scarcities by asking who would feed China when it boomed. Officials fear inflation as a potential cause of social and political instability — not without reason, given that rising prices helped provoke the Tiananmen Square protests. Agricultural imports, of course, have a tendency to become tangled in diplomatic spats.

The answer was historically a simple one: self-sufficiency, particularly in grains like wheat, rice and corn. The idea has been hard to shake, even if the exact meaning of the phrase has softened over the years. Then came the 2020 pandemic, pressing everyone to fret about messy distribution chains. Officials freshened up plans and, projecting an image of self-reliance, Premier Li Keqiang told China's parliament last month that it was imperative to

ensure food supply, while rewarding grain-producing counties and boosting the minimum purchase price for rice.

That doesn't mean the country can simply set the clock back to 1996, when China outlined a strict grain self-sufficiency policy — or that it plans to. In part, what China is doing now is a regular rebalancing of the official position, says Thomas David DuBois at Beijing Normal University, who hosts the China Eats podcast.

For one, a back-to-the-future move would be nigh-impossible. China has become a member of the World Trade Organization. Households eat larger portions and tuck into more protein, increasing demand for grain to feed livestock. Imports of produce have climbed. While China has rice and wheat, it relies on overseas markets like the U.S., Brazil and Argentina for soybeans. It has also sought to increase meat imports after African swine fever hit pork production last year. Agricultural purchases have been key to a trade truce with Washington.

Certainly, the cost of past domestic ambitions has already been extortionate. In environmental terms, the damage has meant fertilizers used at four times the global rate, degraded soil and scarce water. Then there's the financial blow: According to the World Bank, input subsidies rose sevenfold between 2006 and 2010. By that final year, government support for producers amounted to 17% of gross farm receipts. This rising bill, along with other changes, including growing international clout, accounts for Beijing's more balanced approach after late 2013, when policy began to lean toward imports, sustainability, investing abroad and modernizing at home.

It's encouraging that some of those efforts have paid off during the pandemic. Farmers seem to have been better able to handle spring planting disruptions thanks to digital applications. Longer-running policies like the vegetable basket plan that makes city mayors responsible for urban food security, partly to stimulate local production and preserve agricultural land, appear to have worked. Reserves held out. Still, the weaknesses of the global supply chain were exposed.

As ructions with Washington rumble in the background, it's unsurprising that the idea of the national rice bowl held firmly in Chinese hands, filled with Chinese rice, holds some attraction. Yet there are longer-term risks for misallocated resources that already lead to plentiful smuggling of cheaper fare. Not to mention what Amrita Jash at New Delhi's Centre for Land Warfare Studies points out are heightened risks of clashes with neighbors like India, as China seeds clouds in Tibet, or further afield from an expanding fleet of distant-water fishing vessels

It matters, though, that popular concern over issues including genetically modified crops, metal-tainted soil and dirty water — plus official awareness of the cost of ignoring them — means that a new domestic push has a chance of being far less destructive than before. Food safety worries have only heightened of late. Physical constraints like water scarcity will play a role in limiting those aspirations, as Bloomberg Intelligence notes, and shape more sustainable policy by encouraging investment in irrigation and other innovations.

China has little choice but to build food security by balancing internal sufficiency against more diverse international sources, often with Chinese links in the supply chain. That

doesn't necessarily mean large-scale acquisition of land in Africa and elsewhere to ship harvests back home, which is both unpopular and economically punitive. Using its clout on global markets makes more sense.

In this context, the Belt and Road Initiative has been a game-changer in terms of linking up the mainland and friendly sellers when it comes to grains, says Zhang Hongzhou of Nanyang Technological University, who studies China's resource governance. Ukraine is now a leading supplier of corn to China.

China's rice bowl is going to stay mixed a while longer — however tightly it is held.

[Japan] Japan's Work Culture Gets a Needed Covid-19 Shock (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [6/21/2020 6:00 PM, Noah Smith, 6400K, Neutral]

Japan's corporate culture is stuck in a bad place. But the coronavirus pandemic might have given it just the nudge it needs to get out of the trap.

From the 1960s through the 1980s, the country developed a corporate system that worked well. Managers, rather than shareholders, controlled companies, allowing long-term planning and investment, keeping employment levels high and fostering economic equality. Workers were hired with the presumption that they would be at one company for their entire career, which gave their employer an incentive to spend lots of resources training them. And everyone worked very long hours.

Since the 1990s, that system has been under strain. Powerful elderly senior managers, promoted up through the ranks, have often proven unwilling or unable to shift business models or organizational structures in response to changes in technology, consumer demand and trade. Long hours left workers exhausted and made it hard for them to take care of their children. Managers used to focusing on how many hours workers sat at their desks are often unable or unwilling to examine how much work is actually getting done. Lifetime employment became a trap; workers were unable to switch employers, reducing the flow of knowledge and expertise between companies and stifling mobility for ambitious young people. And clubby workplace male-bonding culture created a huge barrier to gender equality.

The Japanese government is aware of the problem, and has been attacking it in various ways -- discouraging long hours, pushing companies to shift to a shareholder-value business model and encouraging gender equality. But while some progress has been made on corporate governance and hiring of women, the entrenched culture of long, unproductive work hours and management models focused on maximizing inputs rather than outputs, has proven very tough to crack. It's easy to tell people to go home earlier, but that doesn't automatically teach managers how to evaluate productivity.

But the shock of coronavirus may provide corporate Japan with just the solution it needs. Japan wasn't hit very hard by the virus, for reasons still poorly understood. But the country did implement some social distancing measures in April and early May, and one of these was to encourage companies to let employees work from home part of the time.

Many needed no prodding. For example, Dentsu, an advertising company famous for

working an employee to death in 2017, had 5,000 workers go remote after one got infected. Japanese companies that produce laptops and other tools for remote work have seen orders surge, while companies that create teleworking software are doing brisk business.

Working from home can encourage a culture of productivity in several ways. First, it can push managers to measure work not by the number of hours an employee logs in a chair, but by the number of discrete tasks that the worker completes in a given time. That in turn encourages managers to think carefully about which objectives are actually important, in order to assign the tasks. Second, working from home pushes workers to think about how they spend their time. At home, there's often the option of doing housework or child care, forcing workers to budget their time-on-task. This flexibility has the added benefit of making it easier for parents to take care of kids while holding down full-time jobs, which might help increase the country's chronically low fertility rate. Finally, working from home saves on commuting time.

That's the theory, anyway. So far, the results are encouraging -- at least, anecdotally. After GMO Internet Inc. sent its workers home earlier than other companies, its chief executive officer was so pleased by the results that he found himself questioning the need for an office at all. More than 60% of Japanese workers say they want to continue working from home after the pandemic has passed, and several big electronics companies and financial companies have declared that some remote work will continue for the foreseeable future. The country's biggest business organization, Keidanren, suggested that telework policies should be made permanent.

The shift isn't going to be easy for Japan. It will take some time for workers and managers to learn to adapt to the new output-oriented style of work; it's no surprise that a substantial percentage of Japanese workers say that working from home has reduced their efficiency. But the long-term benefits are likely to exceed the short-term costs.

The Japanese government, as well as organizations like Keidanren, can help ease the transition. One step is to disseminate information about software and hardware tools that facilitate videoconferencing, data security and other essential elements of remote work. Tax breaks for companies with remote-work options are another possibility. And big media organizations such as national broadcaster NHK can air educational programs and documentaries helping people understand and embrace the shift to remote work, or even entertainment programs showing remote work as a social norm.

Japan's outmoded, inefficient corporate culture is one of the country's main obstacles to regaining lost competitiveness, raising productivity and creating a more accommodating work-life balance. Remote work could be the shock that Japan's corporate culture needs.

[Cuba] Cuba's Shameful Trafficking of Its Doctors (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [6/21/2020 2:43 PM, Samuel J. Dubbin and Jonathan W. Cuneo, Neutral]

Mary Anastasia O'Grady's "Cuban Medical Brigades to Mexico" (Americas, June 15) raises the "lack of transparency" with Cuba's overseas medical missions, which generate over half of Cuba's national budget (three times more than tourism), and which the State Department now recognizes as "forced labor."

In Brazil, Cuba's medical enterprise was arranged and managed by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). We represent Cuban doctors who have sued PAHO under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act and RICO in *Matos v. PAHO*. The complaint alleges that Brazil paid PAHO \$1.5 billion, and PAHO, in turn, paid Cuba \$1.3 billion (85%), pocketed at least \$75 million (5%) and paid the doctors less than 10%. PAHO also enforced Cuba's rules restricting our clients' freedom of movement and subjecting them to surveillance by Cuban intelligence.

When Cuban doctors in Brazil learned that they were making less than 10% of what was paid to the other doctors, many won lawsuits because Brazilian law forbids unequal treatment of foreign workers. Cuba's vice minister of health admitted that Brazil's laws and judicial system posed an existential threat: "[I]t is the first time this problem has arisen in more than 50 years of medical cooperation overseas and it constitutes a risk to the continuity of the program." PAHO's general counsel, attending from Washington, agreed to "respond," and succeeded in redirecting the Brazilian courts.

Despite having received hundreds of millions of U.S. taxpayer dollars, PAHO won't allow State or Congress to investigate. It also claims immunity from federal law in the *Matos* case. But U.S. law precludes immunity when an organization like PAHO engages in commercial activity, violates international law, acts outside of its authority (*ultra vires*) or violates criminal laws. Like the Cubans' lawsuits in Brazil, PAHO's alleged violation of U.S. laws brings its conduct, and Cuba's human trafficking, into the open via the U.S. legal system.

Coronavirus News

WHO reports highest single-day increase in confirmed coronavirus cases (Axios)

Axios [6/21/2020 6:02 PM, Ursula Perano, 526K, Neutral]

The World Health Organization on Sunday reported the pandemic's largest single-day increase of confirmed coronavirus cases, with more than 183,000 cases reported in the last 24 hours, according to AP.

The staggering number of new cases underscores the degree to which the pandemic is accelerating worldwide, not slowing down.

Brazil, the epicenter of the virus in the Southern Hemisphere, reported 54,771 new cases, while the United States reported 36,617. India reported 15,400 cases, bringing the total global case count as of Sunday evening to over 8.7 million.

461,000 people have died from the coronavirus, with more than two-thirds of new deaths coming from the U.S., per AP.

In the U.S., spikes in states like California, Texas, Arizona and Florida are a product of both community spread and increases in testing.

President Trump has brushed off the surge in cases, stating at a rally on Saturday: "When you do testing to that extent, you're going to find more people, you're going to find more cases."

However, the growth in testing does not fully account for the surge in new cases. Michael Osterholm, director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota, warned on Sunday that he does not believe the epidemic will slow down in the summer or fall.

Former FDA commissioner Scott Gottlieb also warned that the outbreaks in some states could tip into "exponential growth" in the next week, and urged Americans to wear masks in public.

New evidence suggests America's fight with COVID-19 is far from over (ABC News)

ABC News [6/21/2020 7:36 PM, Staff, 3795K, Neutral]

New evidence suggests America's fight with COVID-19 is far from over. [Editorial note: consult video at source link]

Coronavirus more likely infected people through natural channels, says former health official (Washington Times)

Washington Times [6/21/2020 1:55 PM, James Varney, 496K, Neutral]

While speculation over the starting point of COVID-19 is rampant, it is more likely to have infected humans through natural channels than from a "hot zone" lab located in Wuhan, China, according to a former top figure in the United States' biodefense programs.

"In my own opinion, it's most likely that somehow humans were infected by this virus either directly with exposure to bats or through some intermediary host, some other animal, because that's how these spillover events have occurred in the past," said Mark Kortepeter, the former deputy director of the United States Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases.

"Now, if you talk about the lab, it's possible they were working on a virus found in nature and somehow somebody got exposed in the lab and that's how this thing started," Dr. Kortepeter said, referring to the Wuhan Institute of Virology, which many people have blamed for the introduction of the novel coronavirus that is blamed for more than 450,000 deaths worldwide.

Neither the speed of COVID-19's rampage nor its lethality offers any proof it broke free of a laboratory environment, and it's nearly impossible to say whether slight mutations in a virus have occurred naturally or were human-made, Dr. Kortepeter said.

"Just because it's more efficient spreading through the population doesn't mean it's been weaponized," he said.

The U.S. intelligence community is currently investigating the origins of novel coronavirus dubbed COVID-19, which causes a respiratory disease that so far has been blamed for the deaths of almost 120,000 Americans.

Still, troubling signs abound in Wuhan, said Dr. Kortepeter, whose new book "Inside the Hot Zone" details his work on the frontlines of Army's biodefense laboratories headquartered at Fort Detrick, Maryland.

For one, the Wuhan Institute previously published work on “gain of function,” a scientific process in which a virus is made more effective. That suggests a degree of biological weapons research there, and could also produce what is known as a “hotter” strain of the coronavirus, Dr. Kortepeter said.

“That makes things a little more suspicious,” he said. “It’s not proof, though, but if they had malintent, I’m not sure they would publish that work.”

The smoking gun — finding an identical genetic strain of coronavirus that was in the lab before the outbreak — likely will never be found, he said, but posing the questions isn’t unreasonable.

The Wuhan Institute has “Biosafety Level 4” labs where scientists in hazmat suits tinker with the world’s most lethal pathogens. While coronavirus is not nearly as deadly as Ebola or smallpox, it could also wind up in Level 4 simply because so little is known about it.

Yet while such sophisticated labs are rare, they offer no sure link to the coronavirus’ still anonymous “patient zero” because, given the extraordinary level of caution associated with work in a Biosafety Level 4 unit, it is much more likely that if COVID-19 jumped into the population from a lab, it did so from a Level 2 or Level 3 facility, Dr. Kortepeter said.

Finally, no one knows exactly who might have had access.

“So there are two scenarios in the lab,” he said. “Either someone got exposed to a natural origin virus or it was an exposure to a manipulated virus. My own opinion is it’s more likely in the natural environment, not in the lab, but as a biodefense guy and an Army guy, I also know that there are some bad actors out there trying to do things out there for nefarious intent.”

As a civilian, Dr. Kortepeter is director of a research group associated with the University of Nebraska that set up the National Quarantine Unit in Omaha that treated Ebola patients in 2014. The lab also treated the first 13 Americans diagnosed with COVID-19 who caught it aboard a cruise ship in Asia.

The national response to COVID-19 in the U.S. has been frustrated by an initial lack of coordination and periodic waves of misinformation, he said.

A recently retracted story in *The Lancet*, the influential British medical periodical, that claimed hydroxychloroquine was detrimental to coronavirus patients is a case in point.

“That sort of thing really haunts us in the scientific community. We don’t need to be adding fuel to the fire,” he said. “I don’t know the answer, scientifically, if there are inserts to the virus genome that look suspicious, but everything has been politicized which just complicates it. Something comes out and Twitter just pounces on it.”

But some reluctance at first is perhaps understandable, Dr. Kortepeter said, likening China’s reaction to what America’s may have been if scientists descended on the U.S. when Lyme disease was first identified in Old Lyme, Connecticut, in 1975.

Despite setbacks and a lack of reliable testing, Dr. Kortepeter said there is some promise on the pharmacological front. While he entertained skepticism about hydroxychloroquine from the outset, he is now hopeful about a cocktail of Remdesivir, a drug that showed some promise with Ebola, and an anti-inflammatory drug.

"It's not a magic bullet, it's a glimmer of hope," he said.

Going forward, a "more surgical, focused response," is a better way to cope with outbreaks than the sweeping shutdowns ordered around the world. It is difficult to say today whether the U.S. is seeing a second wave of the virus or merely upticks in some states that were spared widespread infections in March and April.

"In general, one of the problems is we've been getting mixed messages on the response from all levels of the government. We're learning as we go, but I would say we still don't have unity of effort across the country, I think that's one thing that's hurt us all along. I think we're doing better in terms of scientific innovation."

Humanity's best hope in the short term is that COVID-19 remains a largely stable virus. It is far easier to develop lifetime vaccines for such maladies. Some viruses get sloppy as they furiously reproduce which makes them more resistant to vaccines and treatment.

"It depends on the virus," he said. "This appears to have a more stable genetic component and that's a good thing. It will give us a good chance of developing a vaccine that protects us for a longer period of time."

Near East & North Africa

Spyware technology found on phone of Moroccan journalist, report says (Washington Post)

Washington Post [6/21/2020 6:01 PM, Dana Priest, 18460K, Negative]

Technologists who discovered spyware made by an Israeli company targeting journalists in several authoritarian countries said they found the same spyware used against a Moroccan journalist three days after the company announced a policy against such uses.

Amnesty International's Security Lab, the forensic technology arm of the well-known human rights organization, said it found telltale signs that NSO Group's Pegasus software had been used to infect the cellphone of an award-winning Moroccan journalist and human rights defender, Omar Radi. On Sunday, the group released its analysis of Radi's phone.

In its report, Amnesty said its research "demonstrates NSO Group's continued failure to conduct adequate human rights due diligence and the inefficacy of its own human rights policy." Because NSO says it sells its software only to governments, Amnesty assumes the surveillance was conducted by Moroccan authorities.

In a statement, a company spokesman said: "NSO is deeply troubled by the allegations in the Amnesty International letter. We are reviewing the information therein and will initiate an investigation if warranted." It would not confirm or deny whether Morocco is a client.

The Moroccan government did not respond to requests for comment from The Post.

NSO says it markets its tools to governments for fighting terrorism and crime. Israel classifies Pegasus as a weapon and must approve any exports of the technology. The software can surreptitiously gain access to a phone's camera, microphone, text messages, emails and location information.

NSO has become the target of intense scrutiny by nongovernmental technologist groups and journalists in recent years, and lawsuits have alleged Pegasus software was used against nonviolent dissidents, journalists and human right activists. The firm, founded in 2010, has denied its products have been misused and says it conducts due diligence of potential clients. NSO software was instrumental in the capture of Mexican cartel leader Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman.

In 2018, the Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto's Munk School issued a report alleging Pegasus was used by six countries with a record of spyware abuse against civil society: Bahrain, Kazakhstan, Mexico, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

A lawsuit filed in Israel by a Saudi dissident alleges Saudi authorities used Pegasus to infect his phone and track his friend, Washington Post contributing columnist Jamal Khashoggi, before Khashoggi was killed and dismembered on orders, U.S. intelligence officials concluded, of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. WhatsApp, the communications application owned by Facebook, also is suing NSO, alleging it inserted spy software through its application in violation of federal anti-hacking laws.

NSO in September adopted a policy pledging to continue to uphold United Nations human rights standards, to conduct due diligence before sales, to forgo sales if the risk of abuse of its software is high and to investigate serious allegations of abuse of its software.

David Kaye, the U.N. special rapporteur for human rights, said in an interview that NSO's new human rights policy "is a first step" but "there is nothing about their statement that's enforceable by anyone outside the company." NSO has declined to make public the list of countries that use Pegasus or details about the technology, saying both are confidential.

In the Radi case, Amnesty said it discovered the same type of "network injection" attacks it had documented against another Moroccan journalist, Maati Monjib, in 2019. During such an attack, the software hijacks the victim's browser momentarily and reroutes the victim's request for a particular website to one that is infected by the spyware.

Radi, who works for the LeDesk media outlet, was arrested by Moroccan authorities in December 2019. He was charged with "insulting a public servant" for a tweet he posted that criticized a judge who had convicted 43 people and sentenced them up to 20 years in prison for their participation in a 2017 protest in the northern Rif region. Radi was convicted of the charge and given a four-month suspended sentence. Morocco, a monarchy with an elected legislature, has in recent years increasingly cracked down on speech, independent media and protests.

In an interview, Radi, who lives in Rabat, said his job has been hampered by the

government surveillance and publication of some of his private conversations on a website he described as friendly to police authorities.

"The biggest negative effect is that it makes people reluctant to talk," he said. "It's a deterrent if they know that I'm being bugged."

Other Moroccan journalists have reported having their cellphones infected with spyware when they clicked on a link. In Radi's case, he said he was using the Twitter app to visit the Ministry of Justice website when the website address went "change, change, change. . . . That's when I got infected."

Bill Marczak, a senior research fellow at Citizen Lab who read the Amnesty report on the Radi case, called its technical analysis "very compelling" and said the method of inserting Pegasus software when calling up a website was harder for a cellphone user to detect. "It's very scary, the prospect that visiting a benign website can become a vector for [infecting] your phone."

Radi said government surveillance has become an expected part of journalists' life in Morocco. "You have to live with it," he said. "It's like the coronavirus."

Amnesty's report was released to Forbidden Stories, an international consortium of journalists, including The Post, which investigates threats and violence against journalists.

Saudi downturn deepens Yemen's economic despair (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [6/21/2020 10:41 PM, Anuj Chopra, 12818K, Negative]

On top of war and the coronavirus pandemic, Yemen faces looming economic disaster as a crisis gripping its main benefactor Saudi Arabia dents remittances and leaves state coffers running dry.

Saudi Arabia, leading a five-year military intervention against Iran-linked Huthi rebels, has poured in tens of billions of dollars to prop up the Arab world's poorest country in the form of humanitarian aid, fuel subsidies and cash to its ailing central bank.

But as the double whammy of low oil prices and virus shutdowns triggers deep austerity measures at home, observers say Saudi Arabia no longer appears willing -- or able -- to offer Yemen the same level of support even as the kingdom's military spending remains robust.

Saudi Arabia may also be reassessing its role as what observers call a "regional ATM" after its expensive intervention in Yemen produced few tangible gains, while a bitter power struggle between its anti-Huthi allies complicates its efforts to exit the conflict.

"The Saudis are no more (inclined) to pour unlimited millions and billions into Yemen," a Western official tracking the kingdom's engagement in Yemen told AFP.

Riyadh is the top donor to Yemen -- and the paring back of its support will have the biggest impact, observers say.

Analysts anticipate the Yemeni rial will weaken substantially this year as a \$2 billion central bank deposit from Saudi Arabia in 2018 is nearly exhausted, a scenario that will diminish purchasing power and leave millions unable to afford basic food staples.

Less than \$200 million of that amount remained in May, according to ACAPS, a non-profit project of charities including the Norwegian Refugee Council.

"Yemen is looking increasingly economically vulnerable," ACAPS said in a report, warning that a cessation of Saudi monetary support will lead to a "sharp devaluation" of the local currency.

- Donors hold back -

A donor conference in Riyadh earlier this month secured little over half its target of \$2.4 billion, as the United Nations warned funding shortages could shutter relief programmes just as coronavirus cases spike.

Yemen is already gripped by what the UN calls the world's worst humanitarian crisis, with tens of thousands killed and an estimated four million people displaced by war.

The World Bank says three-quarters of the population lives in poverty and last year the UN estimated 80 percent of Yemenis were at risk of hunger and disease.

At the heart of the economic dysfunction is the country's central bank, split into two rival branches controlled by Yemen's main warring parties.

Compounding the crisis is a "war within a war" that pits southern separatists against the Yemeni government -- both allied against the Huthis.

The separatists, who have declared self-rule in the de facto capital Aden, recently seized a central bank convoy carrying nearly \$80 million, multiple sources said.

A spokesman for the separatist Southern Transitional Council justified the seizure, telling AFP it was meant to protect the currency from sliding further.

The government-controlled central bank now faces the stark prospect of operating with almost no cash.

The feud "has created circumstances that will discourage Saudi Arabia from replenishing its foreign reserve support," said the Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies.

"Yemen's northern neighbour is also in the midst of its own massive budget cuts and no other international donor appears eager to step forward and take Riyadh's place," it wrote in a recent report.

- Remittances plunge -

Charities including Oxfam are also warning of an "unprecedented decline" in remittances to Yemen -- a vital lifeline for millions as the cash-strapped government struggles to pay

wages.

Oxfam said cash transfer providers in six of Yemen's governorates had seen remittances plunge by up to 80 percent between January and April.

There are an estimated 1.6 million Yemenis in Saudi Arabia, where expat workers face sweeping job losses and salary cuts amid the worst economic crisis in decades.

"With millions of Yemenis reliant on remittances from Gulf countries, Saudi Arabia in particular, any economic disruption there has huge consequences in Yemen," Abdulwasea Mohammed, Oxfam's policy adviser in Yemen, told AFP.

"Without family members sending money for basics like food and rent, more families will be forced into debt or will have to skip meals to make ends meet."

Saudi authorities did not respond to AFP's request for comment.

Despite the financial pressure, the kingdom is unlikely to curtail its military spending in Yemen -- estimated to be around \$200 million a day -- as it views the Iran-linked Huthis as an existential threat.

Just days after Riyadh unveiled austerity measures in May, US officials said Boeing was awarded contracts worth \$2.6 billion to supply the kingdom over 1,000 surface-to-air and anti-ship missiles.

[Algeria] Algeria sentences prominent activist to prison (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [6/21/2020 5:49 PM, Staff, 12818K, Neutral]

An Algerian court sentenced prominent anti-government activist Amira Bouraoui to a year in prison on Sunday amid a growing climate of repression, one of her lawyers told AFP.

"This conviction is unjust, there is no evidence. We are going to appeal," lawyer Mustapha Bouchachi said.

Bouraoui, a 44-year-old gynaecologist, is a prominent activist in the "Hirak" protest movement that secured the resignation of former president Abdelaziz Bouteflika last April.

The mother of two was convicted on six counts, including "insulting Islam", "insulting the president" Abdelmadjid Tebboune and "incitement to violate lockdown" during the coronavirus pandemic.

She was also accused of inciting illegal protests, publishing "fake news" likely to jeopardise security or public order and comments that undermine national unity.

Prosecutors had sought 18 months imprisonment.

"These kind of lawsuits, which have been going on for months, won't calm the political situation," Bouchachi said.

"It's not the best way to open up towards society, activists and this peaceful revolution," he added, referring to the Hirak movement.

Bouraoui was taken into custody after being arrested at her home on Wednesday.

A former activist with the Barakat or "That's Enough!" movement, she came to prominence in 2014 when she opposed Bouteflika running for a fourth term.

In recent days Algerian authorities have arrested and prosecuted numerous activists in a bid to prevent protests from resuming when the coronavirus lockdown is lifted.

Most prosecutions are being carried out under a new penal code passed hastily on April 22 amid the public health crisis.

The recent wave of arrests and prosecutions has led some opposition activists to say that the rights situation in Algeria today is worse than during Bouteflika's rule, particularly with regard to freedom of the press.

The North African country has gradually been relaxing its coronavirus lockdown measures since June 7.

But even though large gatherings have been forbidden since mid-March, hundreds of protesters turned out on Friday to resume the weekly protests that marked the political scene before the virus lockdown -- particularly in the northwest Kabylie region, according to local sources.

The authorities arrested nearly 500 people across the country during Friday's banned demonstrations, though most were subsequently released, said Said Salhi, vice president of the Algerian Human Rights League (LADDH).

But of around 100 detained on Friday, nearly 20 were remanded in custody Sunday. The rest were either convicted and sentenced or freed pending trial.

Before the latest wave of arrests, the National Committee for the Liberation of Prisoners (CNLD) said around 60 people linked to the Hirak movement were in detention.

The movement started in February 2019, and after obtaining the resignation of Bouteflika after 20 years in power, protests continued, demanding an overhaul of Algeria's political system in place since independence from France in 1962.

[Iraq] Water hyacinth pest chokes Iraq's vital waterways (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [6/21/2020 11:01 PM, Asaad Niyazi, Ali Allaq, 12818K, Negative]

The broad leaves and delicate purple flowers floating on the Euphrates look breathtaking -- but they are suffocating the waterways of Iraq, celebrated as the "land of the two rivers".

The water hyacinth, nicknamed the "Nile flower" in Iraq, is an invasive plant native to South America's Amazon basin that has ravaged ecosystems across the world, from Sri Lanka to Nigeria.

The fast-spreading pest poses a special risk in Iraq, one of the world's hottest countries that is already suffering from regular droughts and shrinking water resources due to overuse, pollution and upstream river dams.

The exotic flower was introduced to Iraq just two decades ago as a decorative plant, but now the mighty Tigris and Euphrates rivers are being choked by its rapid spread.

Its glossy leaves form a thick cover, absorbing up to five litres (1.3 gallons) of water per plant a day and blocking sunlight and oxygen vital to the aquatic life below.

That has made the hyacinth a formidable floral foe for Iraq's fishermen, who sell hauls of river carp in local markets to those cooking "masgouf", a national delicacy.

Because of the infestation, carp are dying and fishing nets get caught in the tangle of flat leaves, roots and flowers that also hampers boat travel.

"Our livelihoods are gone, all because of this Nile flower," said Jallab al-Sharifi, a fisherman in the southern province of Dhi Qar who makes his living on the Euphrates.

Another fisherman east of Baghdad who works the Tigris said his haul had dropped by as much as half.

- Harvests at risk -

The hyacinths have also impacted Iraqi farmers who already struggle with low water levels due to a series of dams built further upstream in Turkey and Iran.

The thick floating vegetation draws down water levels and clogs irrigation channels leading to agricultural fields.

"During this harvest, our vegetable sales in the local market were down by a third," said Ahmed Yasser, a farmer in a village near Kut, east of Baghdad.

The hyacinth causes another type of pressure -- a 100 square metre (1,000 square feet) patch can weigh up to five tons, putting major strain on dilapidated riverside infrastructure, Iraqi officials warn.

In the village of al-Badaa, the thick columns of a brick bridge that once spanned a wide stretch of the Euphrates are now covered by hyacinths.

A dam further upstream encloses a swamp-like patch of land also covered by the plant.

If the flowers are not removed, "the bridge and dam of al-Badaa will collapse," said Jalil al-Abboudi, the village sheikh.

"And if they collapse, the whole water supply system will collapse."

That would deprive vast regions -- all the way to Iraq's southernmost province of Basra -- of

the fragile water resources their ecosystems and economies rely on.

Iraq's oil-dependent economy is already projected to shrink by nearly 10 percent this year, according to the World Bank.

And a health crisis sparked by a shortage of safe drinking water in the south hospitalised some 100,000 people in 2018.

- 'Spreads like wildfire' -

Locals blame authorities for what they say have been years of neglect and insufficient maintenance.

"The lack of action by the ministry of water resources, and the fact that there have been no renovations of infrastructure, caused an invasion that reached potable water reserves," said Abboudi.

But Saleh Hadi, head of research at Dhi Qar's agriculture directorate, insisted the ministry was well aware of the dangers and working hard to mitigate them.

"The ministry of water resources is working to combat this plant mechanically by uprooting it from irrigation channels," he told AFP.

The perennial predicament has been made even worse this year because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Under normal conditions, Iraqi villagers along the banks of the Euphrates pluck out the plants by hand instead of using a chemical agent that would destroy the delicate ecosystem.

But this year, a countrywide lockdown imposed to stem COVID-19 infections has allowed the hyacinth to spread mostly unhampered.

Some vigilantes, however, are defying the curfew to fight the parasitic flower which they see as a bigger threat to their livelihoods than the pandemic.

While villagers are sneaking out to uproot the plants by hand, Mohammed Kuwaysh, an environmental activist and member of a farming cooperative, is thinking even bigger.

His collective raised about \$800 from local farmers to equip small speedboats to clear waterways by cutting hyacinths en masse.

"The government isn't listening, which allowed this flower to spread like wildfire," Kuwaysh said.

Europe and Eurasia

Coronavirus may change Nordic friendships forever (Politico)

Politico [6/21/2020 11:10 PM, Charlie Duxbury, 4207K, Neutral]

When Finland shut its border with Sweden to stop the spread of coronavirus, it felt to Swedish lawmaker Ida Karkiainen like a throwback to the Cold War.

Years of integration between her northern Sweden home town of Haparanda and the conjoined Finnish town of Tornio were frozen at a stroke as fences were put up to split the community along an international border that residents had long worked to erase.

"It was like the Berlin Wall went up across our town square," Karkiainen told POLITICO.

Her sense of shock has been shared across coronavirus-hit Sweden's frontier regions as Norway and Denmark have joined Finland in banning Swedes from crossing shared borders for fear that coronavirus might come with them.

Now, three months into the ban, the shock is turning into a nagging feeling that fundamental damage might have been done to Nordic relations.

In Sweden's wooded western districts, where shopping malls built to serve Norwegian day-trippers stand empty, and in quiet Stockholm souvenir shops set up to target ferries from Finland, a realization is dawning: Maybe hassle-free travel between Nordic states for all citizens can no longer be taken for granted.

It's a shift with potentially serious ramifications, throwing into question a 66-year integration project.

The wisdom of living in one country and setting up a business in another or sharing infrastructure over borders, hallmarks of the Nordic integration project, suddenly feels up for debate.

"Many decision-makers both in the private sector and the public sector feel betrayed by the border closure," said Philip Sandberg, mayor of the southern Swedish town of Lund, half an hour's drive from the bridge to Denmark. "It is hard to trust in continued integration in the future when we have seen that things can change so much from one day to the next," he told POLITICO.

The shift shows how in some parts of Europe, the coronavirus-related public health crisis has triggered something more akin to a diplomatic crisis, especially where countries have sought to tackle the virus in different ways and seen varying death rates.

In the early days of the pandemic in March, Dutch and Belgian authorities clashed over differences in their approaches. English and Scottish health authorities also locked horns.

But since March, Sweden has become the leading example of a country going its own way and then struggling to harmonize with neighboring states.

Sweden's relaxed approach to fighting the virus — it left schools, businesses and borders open — has worried its neighbors who have watched with concern as the Swedish death rate from Covid-19 has spiked to among the highest in Europe.

Now, as the immediate threat of Covid-19 begins to recede, officials across capitals are facing up to the damage done to Nordic relations, firstly by Sweden's insistence on pursuing its own approach and then by its neighbors' insistence on banning Swedes from their territory.

"I am worried how long these scars will last," Foreign Minister Ann Linde said in a recent interview with Swedish daily DN.

When she announced an extension on the ban on visitors from Sweden last week, Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg also acknowledged the strain the policy was putting on Nordic relations.

"We have to be honest and say that this is a difficult thing for the Nordic region," she told reporters.

The modern integration of the Nordic states dates back to 1954 with the introduction of the Nordic Passport Union, which allowed citizens of Nordic states to travel freely across the region and live and work in any of the countries.

Since then, Nordic officials have worked effectively to eliminate barriers to integration such as ensuring a Norwegian electrician can be certified to work in Finland, said Johan Strang, a researcher in Nordic studies at the University of Helsinki.

While the Nordic states diverged on whether to join the NATO defense alliance and the European Union, their commitment to integration among themselves remained strong and the Passport Union became an important symbol for them to rally around, Strang said.

However, the Passport Union saw its first disruption in 2015 with the decision by Denmark to shut the border with Sweden during the refugee crisis.

Denmark tightened the border again in 2019, citing concerns over violent crime spilling over from Sweden, and then again in March this year citing fears of the coronavirus, a move matched by Finland and Norway.

In June, with death rates lower in every Nordic state but Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark began relaxing border controls with each other, but not with Sweden.

Swedish businesses based on Nordic cross-border trade have looked on in dismay. The huge shopping centers in western Sweden that cater to Norwegian day-trippers say takings have fallen around 90 percent and worries about their future prospects are growing.

Small businesses in Stockholm catering to visitors on huge ferries coming in from Finland report a similar collapse.

"This year is a write-off," said Rana Soheli, 38, who runs a souvenir shop near the city's Old Town. "I've closed down two of three premises, it costs too much to have all of them open."

In southern Sweden, Lund Mayor Sandberg said a report compiled by local lobby group Greater Copenhagen just before the border closed showed that further integration of the region including Copenhagen and southern Sweden could generate nearly 3 billion Danish

kroner (€400 million) in increased economic output per year, resulting in higher tax revenues and more jobs. However, because of the border shutdown, he now doesn't expect to see such gains materialize.

"Now, things will be the complete opposite," he said. "If we have less integration, the recession will be deeper and more people will be unemployed."

In Haparanda, local lawmaker Karkiainen said locals are suffering as the everyday pooling of facilities they have grown used to remains on hold. Plans for Haparanda children to attend swimming training at facilities on the Finnish side had been postponed, she said.

"People are feeling much more insecure about a lot of things," she said. "We now need to have intensive discussions about what we can learn from this experience."

[Belarus] Political Grip Shaky, Belarus Leader Blames Longtime Ally: Russia (New York Times)

New York Times [6/22/2020 12:00 AM, Andrew Higgins, 40577K, Negative] The longtime authoritarian leader of Belarus, under threat like never before ahead of what was supposed to be just another rigged election, is taking a surprising new tack that he hopes will win him sympathy in the West: blaming Russian election meddling.

In power for 26 years, President Aleksandr G. Lukashenko, sometimes called Europe's last dictator, has become so unsettled by a surge of discontent and support for prospective rivals in the August 9 election that he has turned his propaganda machine on Moscow, long his closest ally and principal benefactor.

Once praised by a large segment of the population for keeping Belarus stable and avoiding the turmoil and mass unemployment seen across much of the former Soviet Union in the 1990s, Mr. Lukashenko has recently faced a groundswell of criticism at home, particularly over his mishandling of the coronavirus pandemic, as relations with Moscow have soured and those with Washington have improved.

For years he has manipulated the rivalry between East and West to keep himself in power. Speaking on Friday during a meeting with economic officials in Minsk, Belarus's capital, Mr. Lukashenko claimed that he had thwarted a plot to foment revolution with the arrest a day earlier of Viktor Babariko, a would-be election rival and the former head of a Russian-owned bank.

While not pointing a finger directly at the Kremlin, he said that the "masks have been ripped away not only from the puppets we have here but also the puppeteers who sit outside Belarus."

Nobody was in any doubt that he was talking about Russia.

For two decades, Mr. Babariko headed Belgazprombank, a Belarus bank mostly owned by the state-controlled Russian energy giant Gazprom. He and his son, who ran his father's election campaign, were arrested on Thursday, on suspicion of financial wrongdoing.

Despite the president's long record of disparaging those who speak Belarusian instead of

Russian and jailing Belarus nationalists, he said he would not allow anyone to threaten the country's sovereignty. "There is no greater value than a sovereign and independent Belarus," he declared.

Scores of demonstrators who took to the streets in Minsk and other cities to protest the arrests were detained by security forces, now perhaps the last unwavering base of support for Mr. Lukashenko.

Mr. Babariko's long affiliation with Gazprom, which has often been used by the Kremlin as a geopolitical tool, made him an easy target.

Another would-be candidate, Sergei Tikhanovsky, a popular video blogger and former businessman, has also been arrested and accused of having ties to Russia, notably through a Kremlin-linked oligarch. Investigators claim to have found nearly \$1 million stashed behind a sofa at his home and have suggested the money was from Russia.

Artyom Shraibman, the founder of Sense-Analytics, a Minsk consulting firm and research group, said that Mr. Lukashenko has always sought to discredit his political rivals by portraying them as stooges manipulated by foreign powers. But he used to call them agents of Western plots.

"Times have changed," he said, "So they are now trying to play on anti-Russian sentiment in the West."

Belarus diplomats, Mr. Shraibman said, have started telling their European counterparts not to view the arrest of Mr. Lukashenko's political opponents as an attack on the democratic process, but as a necessary response to Russian interference.

The argument has had few takers.

The European Union protested Mr. Babariko's arrest and called for his immediate release. The United States has not commented on the former banker, but the American embassy in Minsk posted a statement on Twitter urging the Belarusian government "to uphold its international commitments to respect fundamental freedoms," and release the detained protesters.

Belarus has not had an election considered free and fair by independent observers since 1994. Mr. Lukashenko has won five presidential elections in a row, and they have often been accompanied by tough crackdowns.

In the past, however, the crackdowns always followed the voting, when those who supported the defeated opposition candidates would take to the streets to protest rigged voting and other abuses. This time, with the election approaching, Mr. Lukashenko has started the crackdown early, perhaps a sign that he is worried about the outcome.

Independent polling of public opinion is tightly restricted in Belarus, and surveys carried out by pollsters affiliated with the government are usually kept secret.

But a leaked poll conducted by sociologists at the Belarus Academy of Sciences in April

showed that only about a third of the population trusts Mr. Lukashenko, a dismal rating for a leader who controls all television and other traditional media outlets.

Mr. Lukashenko's latest tilt away from Moscow became particularly pronounced after Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Minsk in February. After that visit, the first visit by a secretary of state since the early 1990s, Washington appointed its first ambassador to Belarus in more than a decade, a sign that it wants to normalize relations.

The collapse in oil prices triggered by the pandemic has also influenced Mr. Lukashenko's turn from Russia. In the past, Belarus generated at least 10 percent of its gross domestic product — some estimates say 20 percent — by buying cut-price crude oil from Russia, processing it and then selling it to Europe. But that game ended this year when Russia started demanding market rates for its crude and prices for refined products slumped.

Belarus, Mr. Shraibman said, is also locked into long-term natural gas contracts with Gazprom that require it to pay far more than the current market rate.

Furious with Russia over energy prices and emboldened by thawing relations with Washington, Mr. Lukashenko has increasingly resisted pressure from Russian President Vladimir V. Putin to fuse Belarus and Russia into a so-called "union state," a project that was conceived in the 1990s but then stalled.

Mr. Lukashenko now seems convinced that he can blunt western criticism of his pre-election crackdown by presenting it as a necessary response to Russian meddling.

Ivan Tertel, a close ally of Mr. Lukashenko and the head of an anti-corruption agency leading the charge against Mr. Babariko, warned Moscow this week that the investigation into the former banker would expose the Russian "puppeteers" behind his campaign.

"These people are, we know, big Gazprom chiefs and perhaps even higher," he said, hinting at possible Kremlin involvement.

Maryna Rakhlei, a Belarusian expert on the region at the German Marshall Fund in Berlin, said "there is no evidence" to support accusations of meddling by Gazprom or the Russian state, and that Mr. Lukashenko's troubles were largely the result of widespread fatigue among voters over his long time in office and his poor response to the coronavirus.

Despite only patchy testing for the virus, Belarus has reported over 58,000 cases, compared with about 32,000 in neighboring Poland, which has four times its population.

"The situation threatens to spin out of control for Lukashenko," Ms. Rakhlei said. "He is not really able to silence the protests as they are largely on social media and spread like forest fire."

Younger people in Belarus have long been critical of Mr. Lukashenko, who appeals largely to older citizens, particularly those who live in the countryside and share nostalgic views of the Soviet Union. But the presidential campaign highlights how discontent has reached far beyond young voters and into the Belarus establishment.

The announcement of Mr. Babariko's presidential bid shocked Mr. Lukashenko, who had previously considered him a reliable member of the business elite. Belarus' former ambassador in Washington, Valery Tsepkalo, has also announced plans to run against Mr. Lukashenko.

Before his arrest on Thursday, Mr. Babariko had collected 425,000 signatures in support of his candidacy, a huge number in a country with fewer than 10 million people.

Shortly before his arrest, Mr. Babariko gave an interview to Ekho Moskvyy, a liberal-leaning Russian radio station that is majority owned by Gazprom, and scoffed at the accusation that he was a stooge for Russian interests and was backed by Moscow.

He noted that he had in the past come under criticism in Russia for "using Gazprom's money to develop the Belarus national movement," a reference to his decision to fund the writings of Svetlana Alexievich from Russian into Belarusian. Ms Alexievich, a Belarusian who won the 2015 Nobel Prize in Literature, has been highly critical of Russia under Mr. Putin.

"Russians have always said that I am a Belarus nationalist while Belarusians said that I was pro-Russian, because I worked for Gazprom," Mr. Babariko said. "The West does not know what to think."

[France] In France, Police Tactics Are Less Lethal—but Still Stir Controversy (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [6/21/2020 6:37 PM, Matthew Dalton and Benoit Morenne, Neutral]

When armed Chechens descended on the provincial city of Dijon this month and occupied a predominantly North African neighborhood, the French police broke up fighting with locals when they could and called in reinforcements—but kept their guns in their holsters.

Over several days, the armed men—seeking revenge for a Chechen teenager allegedly beaten in the area—fired their guns as they assaulted people and damaged businesses. When the violence subsided, police began to detain suspects, including Dijon residents and Chechens in cities across France.

The strategy outraged local officials, who accused the police of allowing ethnic groups to settle scores on the street.

"These are rival gangs, armed groups, that are taking justice into their own hands under the eyes of the state, with no reaction," said Thierry Falconnet, mayor of a Dijon suburb hit by violence.

But French authorities and policing experts have defended the response as a textbook case of police restraint. No one died during the unrest. On Friday, Bernard Schmeltz, prefect in charge of the Dijon region, including police forces there, said officers faced "high-tension situations that could at any moment devolve into even more serious trouble."

Police practices and officers' use of lethal force are under the microscope after the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis last month and the fatal shooting of Rayshard Brooks by an

Atlanta police officer this month.

Experts say the restraint shown in the Dijon operation is one reason why police in France and elsewhere in Europe kill far fewer people than their counterparts in the U.S., even when confronted with armed suspects. The French national police and the gendarmes, which police France's rural areas, killed a total of 26 people in 2019, according to BastaMag, a French media organization. U.S. police forces killed 1,098 people last year, according to Mapping Police Violence, a group that tracks police killings. That is about eight times as many police killings as France on a per capita basis.

"There is an urgency in American policing culture in which it is seen as cowardice if you wait," said Lawrence Sherman, director of the Cambridge Centre for Evidence-Based Policing in the U.K. "In Europe, there is a lot less shame in having someone run away, to catch them another day."

Another major reason for the disparity: Restrictive gun laws mean gun ownership is unusual in most of Europe. That makes European police much less likely to use lethal force.

France's approach to violent crime has been honed during years of tensions between police and minority residents of the working-class suburbs, or banlieues. In 2005, deadly riots shook the suburbs of Paris and spread to cities across France after two teenagers were electrocuted in an electrical substation and died as they were chased by the police.

"We know that when we draw our guns we're accused of violence or mistakes," said Stéphane Ragonneau, a police officer involved in the Dijon operations.

Such patience can backfire. When Islamist militants attacked the Bataclan theater in Paris in November 2015, Paris police leaders refused to allow soldiers under their command to intervene, even though they were among the first to respond. "Soldiers, do not engage," one commander said, according to a parliamentary report. "We are not in a war zone." The militants killed 90 people at the Bataclan, in one of the worst terrorist attacks in European history.

Since then, soldiers have been collaborating more closely with elite police units, but there has been no clear change of policy.

Though French police are wary of using lethal force, critics say their tactics can be brutal nevertheless. Police actions during the monthslong yellow-vest protests—such as firing tear-gas canisters and rubber bullets—left one person dead and more than 30 seriously injured. Most of those were eye injuries caused by rubber bullets.

The trouble started in Dijon on June 10 when men of North African origin beat a 19-year-old Chechen with baseball bats at a hookah lounge, said Eric Mathais, the Dijon prosecutor.

Members of the Chechen community put out calls on social media for people to rally in the city of 150,000 in the Burgundy region, known more for mustard than ethnic conflict.

Days later, Chechens from across France arrived in cars whose license-plate numbers were covered by black tape, wielding assault rifles, baseball bats and steel bars, according to

police. About 100 masked men gathered in front of the hookah bar, Mr. Mathais said. Some forced their way in, ransacking it and assaulting people, injuring four seriously.

Opposition and local politicians criticized the government and the police, saying they had abandoned the city.

"Our country sinks into chaos!" said Marine Le Pen, leader of the far-right National Rally party. "Gangs are waging an ethnic war, automatic weapons in hand."

Police used tear gas to break up fighting between the Chechens and North Africans at the hookah bar but were unable to make arrests, Mr. Mathais said. In the following days, the Chechens played cat-and-mouse with the authorities, officials said, gathering out of sight of the police presence to assault people who appeared to be of North African descent.

The government of President Emmanuel Macron defended its response to the incident. "Our security forces never balk when they are called upon," said French Interior Minister Christophe Castaner, adding that the police had been outnumbered by "a savage horde."

On Saturday, Mr. Mathais, the Dijon prosecutor, said six members of the French Chechen community in several cities were detained in connection with the violence. His office brought preliminary charges of assault and destruction of property against four of the men and released the other two without charging them. France's Chechen community numbers in the tens of thousands, many of whom are political refugees from Russia.

"The norm here is that police act with discernment," said Jean-Michel Fauvergue, former commander of the RAID, an elite police unit, and now a lawmaker in Mr. Macron's party. "This is something that one has to understand about French mentality. We won't draw our guns and shoot everyone."

[France] Police clash with music festival attendees in Paris and Nantes (Reuters)

Reuters [6/21/2020 5:58 PM, Staff, 12818K, Negative]

French police clashed sporadically with people attending music festivals in Paris and the western city of Nantes on Sunday, TV stations BFM and C News reported.

Many cities in France were holding annual "Fete de la Musique" events, which were monitored closely by police to ensure people were complying with social-distancing measures imposed to curb the coronavirus.

BFM TV said police had to move in to disperse crowds from Paris' Canal St Martin, while C News and residents of Nantes broadcast images of police using tear gas on crowds in Nantes.

The event in Nantes also coincided with a demonstration to mark the anniversary of the death of Steve Canico, who died after a clash between police and revellers in June 2019.

Canico's death became a focal point for protests and scrutiny over policing methods in France. The 24-year-old disappeared at a concert where police had clashed with late-night revellers by the riverbank in Nantes, and Canico's body was subsequently found in the Loire

River.

Residents of Nantes posted images and videos on Twitter of some demonstrators setting bins on fire.

Officials at the Nantes police department could not be immediately reached for comment.

[Netherlands] Dutch police detain 400 after protest over coronavirus restrictions (Reuters)

Reuters [6/21/2020 4:29 PM, Stephanie van den Berg, 5304K, Negative]

Police in The Hague said they detained some 400 people on Sunday after demonstrators refused to leave a protest against the Dutch government's social-distancing measures put in place to halt the spread of the coronavirus.

Several thousand protesters had gathered in the Malieveld area in The Hague, close to the Dutch seat of government, even though the rally had been banned by the municipality.

"We have detained some 400 people today. A large number of them have been since let go," the police said on Twitter.

The authorities had allowed a brief protest to go ahead in the afternoon before asking demonstrators to leave.

Protesters were wearing T-shirts that read: "Stop the lockdown" and carried banners demanding that the Dutch rule to keep a distance of 1.5 metres (5 feet) from one another be lifted.

Police eventually ended the demonstration and detained a group of 400 people who refused to leave.

The Hague Mayor Johan Remkes said the demonstration was banned because authorities had information that "troublemakers" from all over the Netherlands, including groups of known football hooligans, were planning to descend on The Hague.

"This has nothing to do with protesting or the right to freedom of speech. This group was deliberately trying to disturb public order," Remkes said in a statement.

[Serbia] Serbian ruling party wins by landslide in Europe's first Covid-19 election (Politico)

Politico [6/21/2020 8:33 PM, Staff, 4207K, Neutral]

Serbia's ruling Progressive Party won a resounding victory in a parliamentary election on Sunday, exit polls show, in Europe's first national election as coronavirus lockdowns start to ease.

"We won everywhere," said Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, a co-founder and the leader of the party, at a press conference. "Tonight, we gained the huge trust of the people, the greatest ever in Serbia."

The Progressive Party is projected to have won about 63 percent of the vote, according to exit polls by the Center for Free Elections and Democracy (CeSID), and over 180 seats in the 250-strong parliament — an increase from the 131 seats it had in the previous legislature.

Serbia ended its state of emergency restrictions on May 6, and while the government has recommended certain safety measures, public events such as football matches with audiences of around 20,000 have resumed.

The win offers Vučić a familiar victory as he heads off to Washington next weekend for talks hosted by the White House with the leader of Kosovo, Serbia's breakaway province whose independence Belgrade does not recognize. The two states have been locked in a frozen conflict since 1999, when NATO bombing ended Serbian control of Kosovo in the last of the wars that tore Yugoslavia apart.

But the opposition also felt vindicated in the election's low turnout after campaigning for voters to boycott the ballot to push for reforms: Turnout is thought to be around 49 percent. Although there is no legal requirement for a 50-percent turnout for elections to be valid, opposition parties argue that failing to reach that threshold delegitimizes the vote.

Dragan Đilas, the leader of the Union for Serbia, said he considered the boycott a success. "People were bussed in to vote, pressured, threatened, telephone calls, all of that was not enough for them to achieve over 50 percent turnout today," Đilas said in a press conference.

Vučić and his right-wing populist party have fared well in elections since first forming a government in 2012, due both to the president's individual popularity and his projected image as a defender of Serbian interests in the region and abroad, as well as a nationwide system of patronage that employs loyalists in public institutions and key industries.

For voters who work in public institutions, support for the party means maintaining the relative level of stability to which they have grown accustomed. "I live as well as I can in this part of the world, so I'm voting for those who enabled that for me. I work in a public institution and I want my daughter to work there too, so I'm not boycotting the elections," said Marija Petrovic, 41, who voted in the Zvezdara region in Belgrade.

But opposition parties and movements have decried the ruling party's hold on power within the country, organizing near-weekly protests for the past year and a half before the pandemic, and vowing to boycott elections.

The Progressive Party ultimately made some concessions, including lowering the threshold for parties to enter parliament to 3 percent from 5 percent of the vote. But the opposition bloc then split and some parties, such as the Movement of Free Citizens (PSG), led by one of the key figures of the protest movement, Sergej Trifunović, decided to run. PSG received around 1.8 percent of the vote and did not pass the threshold, according to the exit poll.

Serbia has plunged in democracy rankings compiled by NGO Freedom House in recent years. The organization's annual Nations in Transit report cited "years of increasing state capture, abuse of power, and strongman tactics employed by Aleksandar Vučić."

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán was one of the first international leaders to congratulate Vučić on his victory on Instagram, posting a photo of the pair shaking hands.

European Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi — also from Serbia's northern neighbor Hungary — called the results an "important day for Serbia," tweeting that he looked forward to helping Serbia "move forward quickly towards EU accession."

[United Kingdom] UK's Johnson to announce lockdown easing plans on Tuesday (Reuters)

Reuters [6/21/2020 5:30 PM, Michael Holden, 5304K, Neutral]

Prime Minister Boris Johnson will unveil the latest easing of Britain's coronavirus lockdown on Tuesday when he will also announce the conclusion of a review into whether a two-metre rule on social distancing should be relaxed, his office said.

Britain's economy has been hammered by the lockdown to stop the spread of COVID-19 and although non-essential retailers were allowed to reopen last Monday, many businesses, particularly in the hospitality and leisure sectors, have remained closed.

Some lawmakers in Johnson's party have been vocal in calling for him to drop the two-metre rule saying it was having a devastating impact on the economy which shrank by a quarter over March and April. But the government has been cautious, saying it did not want to risk a second spike in novel coronavirus cases.

Johnson's office said the prime minister would tell parliament on Tuesday which sectors would be allowed to reopen on July 4 under the government's roadmap out of the lockdown. Detailed guidance would be provided to each sector so businesses were "Covid secure".

The Sunday Telegraph reported that Johnson would also announce a change to the social distancing guidelines so people would only need to remain one metre apart providing they took additional measures such as wearing a mask.

Britain has one of the highest death tolls in the world from COVID-19, but the number of cases has been steadily falling in recent weeks. The death toll on Sunday of confirmed cases rose by 43 to 42,632, one of the lowest increases since the lockdown was imposed in March.

"The disease is increasingly under control," Johnson said on Sunday. "Of course as we make that progress, it will be possible for us to open up more. On social distancing, watch this space and you won't have very much more to wait now."

Health Secretary Matt Hancock said there were possible mitigations that could allow people to be closer than two metres while limiting the risk of spreading the virus. He said he would not rule out people having to register their details before going to a pub or a restaurant.

A spokeswoman for Johnson said it was important that people followed the social distancing rules as they were eased and they would "not hesitate" to put the handbrake on.

[United Kingdom] Boris Johnson to discuss easing lockdown and two-metre rule with scientists (Yahoo News/PA Media)

Yahoo News/PA Media [6/21/2020 7:01 PM, Sam Blewett, 12818K, Neutral]

Boris Johnson will discuss reopening the hospitality sector and loosening the two-metre social-distancing rule in England with his top Cabinet colleagues and scientists.

The Prime Minister and his most senior ministers will on Monday discuss the next steps for the lockdown with chief scientific adviser Sir Patrick Vallance and chief medical officer for England Professor Chris Whitty.

Mr Johnson will then on Tuesday outline the plans to Parliament for pubs, restaurants, hotels and hairdressers to reopen in England from July 4, and a likely loosening of the distance rule to aid the restart to the economy.

It comes as a Tory former minister said the Government appeared "a bit knackered" as it responded to the challenges of post-outbreak Britain.

Tim Loughton MP told BBC Radio 4's Westminster Hour: "The last few weeks the Government has taken a battering and I think it's proving more challenging to come out of lockdown than it was to go into lockdown.

"Let's remember, it's only a few weeks ago that the Prime Minister was in intensive care and for him to come back so quickly at the helm, I think, is slightly concerning."

On Sunday, the PM said the progress made in the fight against coronavirus during three months of lockdown mean "it will be possible to open up more".

"The disease is increasingly under control and I just want people to reflect on that important fact," he added in a Downing Street interview.

Guidance will be published for each sector on how businesses can reduce the spread of Covid-19 when they reopen.

And the public are expected to be warned that the newest relaxation of rules will be the first to be reversed if there are widespread breaches that prompt the virus to spread uncontrollably.

A No 10 spokesman said: "The reason we are able to move forward this week is because the vast majority of people have taken steps to contain the virus.

"The more we open up, the more important it is that everyone follows the social-distancing rules.

"We will not hesitate to put the handbrake on to stop the virus running out of control."

With the two-metre rule placing severe constraints on the hospitality sector, it looks increasingly likely to be reduced as long as other mitigations – such as face coverings – can be used to help prevent a second wave of Covid-19 infections.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock has said England is "clearly on track" to further ease the lockdown.

Acknowledging that "a lot of the country does need a haircut", Mr Hancock told Sky's Sophie Ridge on Sunday that he is "not going to rule out" hairdressers and barbers also being able to reopen on July 4.

He gave perspex screens, masks and altered seating arrangements as examples of measures to mitigate the risk of spreading coronavirus if the two-metre rule is relaxed.

And he floated the idea that punters at pubs and bars could have to sign a guest book with their names and contact details so they could be swiftly traced if they come into contact with an infection.

Shadow health secretary Jonathan Ashworth said Labour would support a reduction of the two-metre rule "under certain circumstances", including the strengthening of other protections such as masks.

To aid the economy's recovery, Mr Hancock did not rule out suggestions that Rishi Sunak could slash VAT to encourage spending, telling Ridge: "It's very much a matter for the Chancellor."

The Health Secretary also said a reduction in the distance rule would "undoubtedly help with schools", pointing to Northern Ireland where it will be reduced to one metre.

[United Kingdom] Jailed UK-Iranian pleads with PM Johnson to help inmates (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [6/21/2020 10:48 PM, Alice Ritchie, 12818K, Negative]

The sound is a little fuzzy but Anoosheh Ashoori's voice does not falter as he delivers his message to British Prime Minister Boris Johnson from inside Iran's Evin jail.

"We are in desperate need of your help," the retired engineer, who holds British and Iranian passports, says in a recording made on the phone to his wife in London.

During the three years since his arrest in Tehran, he has endured interrogations and stints in solitary that made him try to end his life, but the 66-year-old's biggest fear now is coronavirus.

"I am appealing to you to take action and get me and my fellow British citizens out of Evin prison, where the threat of COVID-19 is as strong as ever," he urged Johnson, in the recording shared with AFP.

"My fear is that we have been forgotten by the British government."

Ashoori was visiting his mother in Tehran in August 2017 when he was arrested, accused of spying for Israel and later jailed for 10 years, his family says.

Dual nationals from various countries have been detained in Iran, in what campaigners and

the British government say is a policy of hostage-taking aimed at pressuring the West.

In an interview in the garden of Ashoori's southeast London home, his wife, Sherry Izadi, dismisses the charges against him as "preposterous" and says his trial only lasted an hour.

The father-of-two had never been involved in politics, she said, telling AFP: "We're very ordinary -- we're extremely unimportant."

And yet, "he went out one day to do some shopping and he never came back".

- 'Nothing to lose' -

She said initially, long interrogations and time spent in solitary confinement threatened to break her husband, who staged a 17-day hunger strike and tried to kill himself.

Since his conviction he has been better, keeping fit and joining impromptu lessons with fellow inmates, but the family fears for the future.

"It would be unimaginable for someone innocent to stay somewhere for 10 years for something he's never done," she says.

Some foreign prisoners were given temporary release at the start of the coronavirus outbreak, including British-Iranian Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, whose husband has campaigned relentlessly for her freedom.

But Ashoori remains in jail and the family are increasingly impatient with the lack of progress made by the British government.

Izadi met Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab in October but says "nothing has come of it".

The Foreign Office advised them not to talk to the media while it tried the diplomatic route, but Ashoori has asked them to release his statements, which form part of a diary he is recording in daily calls with his wife.

"He says he's got nothing to lose," his daughter Elika, 33, told AFP.

- Diplomatic pawns -

The Foreign Office has recorded around a dozen incidents of people with British passports being arrested in Iran since 2015, and in May last year it advised dual British-Iranian nationals not to visit.

Former foreign secretary Jeremy Hunt in December 2018 accused Tehran of using foreign passport holders as "pawns of diplomatic leverage" -- a claim Iran strongly denies.

Supporters of Ashoori and Zaghari-Ratcliffe believe their cases are linked to a long-running legal battle over £400 million (\$500 million) Iran paid to Britain in the 1970s for tanks that were never delivered.

But campaigners have also cried foul over the detention of dual nationals from other countries, including French-Iranian academic Fariba Adelkhah.

In another message sent from prison, Ashoori says one of his fellow inmates witnessed Adelkhah being brought into jail.

She was "kicked and dragged on the floor by her hair, and was showered with curses and other physical and verbal abuse" by secret police guards, he said.

- Due judicial process -

A Foreign Office spokesman said the fate of the dual nationals held in Iran was "a priority" and raised with Tehran at the highest levels of government.

"We strongly urge Iran to reunite British-Iranian dual national Mr Ashoori with his family," a spokesman said.

But the Iranian embassy in London rejected any claims of politically motivated charges.

Ashoori had been convicted of "national security-related crimes by the Iranian judiciary in a due judicial process in which Mr. Ashoori had the right and opportunity to defend himself," it said in a statement to AFP.

"Iranian authorities ensures proper access to medical services for prisoners inside or outside prisons based on regular checks."

[United Kingdom] PM urged to reconsider Dfid merger with Foreign Office by almost 200 charities (Yahoo News/PA Media)

Yahoo News/PA Media [6/21/2020 7:01 PM, Staff, 12818K, Neutral]

Merging the Department for International Development (Dfid) with the Foreign Office is an "unnecessary and expensive distraction" that will diminish the UK's reputation, almost 200 charities believe.

The Government's decision to scrap the department through the merger suggests the UK is turning its back on the world's poorest people, 188 humanitarian aid and development charities, NGOs and think tanks said.

The groups, which include Save the Children UK, ActionAid UK and Tearfund, have written to Prime Minister Boris Johnson asking him to urgently reconsider.

It comes as the head of Save the Children UK warned the world is on the brink of "potentially the worst reversal in progress for children that we've seen since 1945".

The letter reads: "Abolishing one of the world's most effective and respected Government departments at a time when the world is in need of global leadership undermines our response to Covid-19 and suggests the UK is turning its back on the world's poorest people.

"It also risks us being less able to respond to the great challenges of our time, such as

global health security and climate change.”

The charities say it is an “unnecessary and expensive distraction” from building up Britain’s role in the world and the sector was not consulted about the plans.

It concludes: “This decision, taken during a global pandemic with no consultation, ahead of the review of development, diplomacy and defence and against the recent advice of the cross-party International Development Select Committee, does not enhance our reputation in the world but diminishes it.”

The decision to close Dfid after 23 years and create the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has also come under criticism from opposition MPs and three former prime ministers, including the Conservative David Cameron.

Save the Children UK chief executive Mr Watkins said it is a “terrible decision” announced with “appalling timing”.

He fears some politicians will call for the aid programme to be scaled down to increase domestic spending as the UK deals with the economic fall-out from Covid-19.

Now is the “the testing ground for whether ‘Global Britain’ is a real commitment or an empty phrase”, he said.

Mr Watkins told the PA news agency: “The UK is going to face enormous fiscal pressures in the years ahead.

“The UK public are incredibly generous in the way they respond to humanitarian emergencies, the UK public is not inward looking and disinterested in the plight of people in the poorest countries but there clearly is a danger that there will be political forces saying ‘let’s scale down the aid programme in order to scale up spending in priority areas in the UK’.

“We believe we can have a fiscal framework that tackles poverty, health, educational challenges in the UK and extend that moral purpose to developing countries.”

He added: “Every parent in the UK is desperately concerned about education in this country and especially the education gaps that are opening up because of lockdown.

“In the world’s poorest countries you’ve got over a billion children who are now out of school, who are at real risk ... in the same way we have to view education as a really critical part of life chances for young people in the UK, that’s equally true in the poorest countries.”

Stephanie Draper, chief executive of Bond, the UK international development network, said the sector fears aid will be directed away to be used for trade deals.

“This would be a disaster for the UK’s credibility as a world leader in development and aid, especially at a time when Covid-19 requires a global response, without which it remains a threat to us all,” she said.

A Government spokeswoman said: "As the PM has said, the merger of Dfid and FCO will ensure that all of our national assets – including our aid budget and expertise – are used to safeguard British interests and values overseas.

"This will strengthen our ability to lead the world's efforts to recover from the coronavirus pandemic and allow us to seize the opportunities ahead as we prepare to take on the G7 presidency and host COP26 next year.

"The work of UK aid to reduce poverty will remain central to the new department's mission and we will continue to be guided by our responsibilities under the International Development Act, including a commitment to the target of spending 0.7%, which is enshrined in law.

"The Government will continue its ongoing engagement with UK and international NGOs, including on issues relating to the merger."

[United Kingdom] UK terror suspect identified as Libyan national, security source says (CNN)

CNN [6/21/2020 12:28 PM, Salma Abdelaziz, Nick Paton Walsh, Nada Bashir and Amy Woodyatt, 12317K, Neutral]

A 25-year-old man suspected of launching a fatal terror attack in Reading, England on Saturday has been identified by a security source as a Libyan national.

Speaking to CNN, the security source named the suspect as Khairi Saadallah. The source said mental health was considered to be a factor in the assault, which contributed to the reasons police took some time to declare it a terrorist incident.

Saadallah, who is currently in police custody, is under investigation by the UK's Counter Terrorism Policing unit after a knife attack in Reading's Forbury Gardens on Saturday afternoon that left three dead and several others injured.

UK Assistant Commissioner for Counter Terrorism Policing, Neil Basu, said no further suspects are under investigation by the police.

"I am deeply saddened by the events of last night. This was a truly tragic incident and the thoughts of Thames Valley Police are with all those who have been affected," Chief Constable John Campbell of Thames Valley Police said Sunday.

"Incidents of this nature are very rare, though I know that will be of little comfort to those involved and understand the concern that this incident will have caused amongst our local community," he added.

Eyewitness Lawrence Wort, who was in the park at the time of the attack, told CNN that people were relaxing and enjoying the sun when he heard a man shouting and yelling. The man began to approach people in the park, and started to stab people in the neck and under the arms, and attacked multiple people in this way, Wort said.

A CNN team saw counter-terrorism police at an apartment block, who were combing for

evidence early into the morning. Police asked some residents to stand outside their work so they could carry out their work.

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson said on Sunday that he was "appalled and disgusted" by the incident, but that he saw "no reason" to raise the country's terror alert level.

"I am appalled and disgusted that people should lose their lives in this way and our thoughts are very much with the families and friends of the victims today," he said.

Johnson said he had spoken to the Chief Constable of Thames Valley police, and "thanked him and his officers for their bravery in tackling the suspect."

The police have urged members of the public to avoid the area, confirming that cordons remain in place; they have also called for witnesses to come forward with information.

"We would like to hear from anyone who has video footage. Out of respect for those deceased and injured, along with their loved ones, please do not circulate this footage on social media -- this will be incredibly distressing," Chief Constable Campbell said.

"From our enquiries undertaken so far, officers have found nothing to suggest that there were any other people involved in the attack, and presently, we are not looking for anyone else in relation to this incident," he said in a statement, adding that detectives were working with security services to ensure there was "no related outstanding threat to the public."

Basu also noted that the incident was not at all associated with a peaceful Black Lives Matter protest, which took place earlier in the day and concluded hours before the attack.

[United Kingdom] Suspect known to MI5 held over terror knife attack in park that killed three (Yahoo News/PA Media)

Yahoo News/PA Media [6/21/2020 7:01 PM, Staff, 12818K, Negative]

A terror suspect held over the knife attack in a Reading park that killed three people came to the attention of MI5 last year, security sources have said.

The 25-year-old man, understood to be named Khairi Saadallah, was detained a short distance from the scene at Forbury Gardens and arrested on suspicion of murder.

He was later re-arrested under Section 41 of the Terrorism Act, which gives police the power to detain him without charge for up to 14 days.

School teacher James Furlong, 36, is the only victim to be named so far.

Two other people injured in the attack remain in hospital, while one has now been discharged.

It emerged on Sunday the suspect, a refugee of the civil war in Libya, briefly came to the attention of MI5 last year, but the information provided did not meet the threshold of investigation.

PA understands from security sources that M15 had received intelligence he planned to travel abroad, possibly for terrorism purposes, but the threat was found to be insubstantial.

As counter-terror officers investigate, mental health is understood to be considered a major factor in the latest incident.

Police have said they are not looking for anyone else in connection with the attack.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson said he was "appalled and sickened" by the incident and said "we will not hesitate to take action" if there are lessons to be learned from the circumstances.

The suspect was jailed in October for a complex series of non-terror offences before his sentence was reduced to one of 17 months and 20 days' imprisonment in the Court of Appeal.

One of the appeal judges who gave the judgment in March, Mr Justice Goss, noted Saadallah's various mental health issues in reducing the sentence.

Saadallah was released from prison earlier this month, it is understood, and the Covid-19 pandemic played no part in the decision to free him.

The Sun reported that he left HMP Bullingdon, Oxfordshire, 17 days ago after less than half of his sentence.

Tributes from former students of Mr Furlong poured in after a letter from the two co-head teachers at his school – the Holt School in Wokingham – announcing his death was circulated online.

His parents, Gary and Janet, said in a statement: "He was the best son, brother, uncle and partner you could wish for.

"We are thankful for the memories he gave us all. We will never forget him and he will live in our hearts forever."

Security guard Sydney McDonald, 65, who saw suspect being rugby-tackled to the ground by police described how it looked as if he had put his hands "in a big bucket of red paint".

He told the PA news agency: "I had just finished work at about 7.10pm and as soon as I came out of the shop, there were about four police cars, they turned around in the middle of the road, they were driving pretty fast.

"There was a guy and I saw him pointing to a man and saying 'There he is, there he is'. If he hadn't, they would have missed him. He was running really fast, properly fast.

"They put the emergency brakes on, jumped out of the car and rugby-tackled him to the floor. He was on his stomach and the blood on his hands looked like he had put his hand in a big bucket of red paint.

"They put the handcuffs on, he wasn't putting up a fight or anything like that, they picked him up and put him in the van, he just sat there all quiet, he wasn't saying nothing."

Personal trainer Lawrence Wort, 20, who said he was around 10 metres from the incident, told PA on Saturday night the suspect was alone and "shouted some unintelligible words" before launching the attack.

"He went around a large group of around 10, trying to stab them," he said.

"He stabbed three of them, severely in the neck, and under the arms, and then turned and started running towards me, and we turned and started running."

East Asia and Pacific

[Australia] Australia Fears Second Wave as State Tightens Virus Controls (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [6/21/2020 10:57 PM, Jason Scott, 6400K, Negative]

Australia's second-most populous state has tightened coronavirus controls as a spike in cases triggers fears the nation could be hit by a second wave of infections.

Victoria extended a state of emergency by four weeks to July 20, halved the number of visitors allowed in homes to 5 and delayed a planned increase in the size of gatherings in cafes, restaurants and pubs.

The weekend announcement, and a jump in cases in countries including the U.S., Israel and South Korea, heightened market concerns about the difficulty of reviving economic growth while controlling the spread of Covid-19. The Australian dollar declined against most of its Group-of-10 peers on Monday, falling as much as 0.4% before recovering, while the benchmark S&P/ASX 200 index initially declined as much as 1% before recouping its losses.

Australia has managed to limit the total number of coronavirus cases to about 7,460 by closing international and state borders, quarantining returning residents in hotels, social distancing measures and a widespread testing and tracing regime. But concerns are growing about community transmission in Victoria, responsible for 116 new cases in the past week -- 83% of the national total, as of June 21. Of those, 87 were largely associated with community transmission.

"This is part of living with Covid-19," Prime Minister Scott Morrison told reporters in Sydney on Monday. "We will continue on with the process of opening up our economy and getting people back into work. But there will be set backs from time to time."

On Monday, Victorian health authorities announced they had detected a further 16 cases in the past 24 hours -- six linked to known outbreaks, four detected in hotel quarantine, five detected through routine testing, and one under investigation.

Health authorities are warning people to avoid traveling to six areas in the state capital, Melbourne. A professional Australian Football League match scheduled to be played in the

city on Sunday was postponed after a player contracted the virus.

The spike in cases may cause states and territories such as Queensland, Western Australia and Tasmania to keep their borders closed beyond July, despite pressure from Morrison to allow inter-state travel to boost tourism and buoy the shattered economy.

On Monday, health authorities in New South Wales state strongly discouraged travel to and from Victoria because of the spike. Queensland Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk told reporters that the National Cabinet was expected to discuss interstate border restrictions when it meets on Friday, describing the outbreak in Victoria as a "national concern."

Australia's Chief Medical Officer Brendan Murphy on Monday said he was concerned by the "fairly rapid rise" of infections over a few days in Victoria, which appeared to be caused by family gatherings. In some instances, people who had tested positive or come into contact with an infected person had failed to self-quarantine.

"Complacency is dangerous," Murphy told the Australian Broadcasting Corp.

There was no sign the Black Lives Matter rally in Melbourne earlier this month had caused a spike, he said. Officials don't believe the three protesters who have tested positive were infected at the rally, or transmitted it there. However, the mass protests may have encouraged other people to flout social distancing rules and gather in larger numbers, he said.

If lockdown measures are re-imposed more widely, it could further damage the economy and erode business confidence and consumer sentiment, said Nathan Cloutman, a senior industry analyst at IBISWorld. "Businesses are now less likely to re-stock supplies and re-hire employees when social distancing is removed, out of fear that restrictions will be re-imposed before they can generate revenue to cover those costs."

[Australia] Virgin Australia bondholders working on potential revival plan - source (Reuters)

Reuters [6/21/2020 11:34 PM, Staff, 5304K, Neutral]

Virgin Australia Holdings Ltd bondholders are working on a revival plan for the airline involving a debt-to-equity swap if they are not satisfied with a sale offer, according to a person with knowledge of the matter.

Binding bids from finalists Bain Capital and Cyrus Capital Partners were due on Monday for Australia's second-biggest airline, which entered voluntary administration in April and owes nearly A\$7 billion to creditors.

The airline owes about A\$2 billion total to 6,500 unsecured bondholders, the second-most numerous creditor group behind employees that will vote on a deal at a meeting in August.

The bondholders are preparing the backup plan to help avoid liquidation if the administrator's preferred offer is not acceptable, the person with knowledge of the matter told Reuters on condition of anonymity.

The threat of a rival plan could also make the bidders and the administrator, Deloitte, more attuned to their interests.

Although not all of the details have been worked out, the bondholders want the debt-to-equity swap to happen soon, ahead of a later sale once coronavirus-related volatility in the airline industry subsides, the person said.

Deloitte did not respond immediately to a request for comment.

It has previously said it intends to sign a binding deal with the winning bidder by June 30.

Virgin bondholders include FIIG Securities, Northern Trust Asset Management, Sargon CT and The Bank of New York Mellon, which are members of the administrator's committee of inspection.

[China] China's new low-sulphur fuel oil contract jumps in debut trade (Reuters)

Reuters [6/21/2020 9:41 PM, Muyu Xu and Emily Chow, 5304K, Neutral]

China's new low-sulphur fuel oil (LSFO) futures contract jumped sharply in its debut, rising more than 13% at its opening on the Shanghai International Energy Exchange on Monday.

The January contract was last trading around 11.5% higher at 2,640 yuan (\$373.37) per tonne, versus a listing price of 2,368 yuan per tonne.

[China] China Security Law Will Override Hong Kong Legal System (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [6/21/2020 6:39 PM, Staff, 6400K, Neutral]

China confirmed that a proposed national security law would allow Beijing to override Hong Kong's independent legal system, shedding new light on a move that has stoked tensions with the U.S. and threatens the city's status as a top financial center. Yvonne Man reports on "Bloomberg Daybreak: Australia." [Editorial note: consult video at source link]

[New Zealand] New Zealand central bank to stand pat but keep dovish view, as pandemic rages: Reuters poll (Reuters)

Reuters [6/21/2020 9:23 PM, Praveen Menon, 5304K, Neutral]

New Zealand's central bank is expected to hold rates steady at its policy meeting on Wednesday, but strike a dovish tone as fears of a second wave of the coronavirus pandemic brings further economic uncertainty.

All economists polled by Reuters expected the official cash rate (OCR) to remain unchanged at 0.25% for the rest of the year, and at least some of them see rates moving to zero and negative territory next year.

The Reserve Bank of New Zealand (RBNZ) said in May that the cash rate will remain at 0.25% until early 2021, but it was working with commercial banks to prepare for negative rates in the future.

New Zealand was among the first countries to declare it was free of COVID-19, and opened its economy faster than most others. But those gains were lost last week as new coronavirus cases emerged, and fears of a second wave of infections are growing.

ANZ Bank said in a note that RBNZ would acknowledge activity bouncing back but also would point out that the country had not dodged a recession.

It would strike a balance between "an encouraging tone while still sounding suitably dovish" in order to keep the New Zealand dollar and monetary conditions low, Sharon Zollner said.

"The renewed strength in the NZD represents a meaningful

tightening in monetary conditions that will be decidedly unwelcome," she said.

The economy is in recession after GDP contracted 1.6% in the March quarter and expected to sink further in the next three-month period.

RBNZ would have to raise the NZ\$60 billion (\$38.5 billion) cap on its quantitative easing programme at some point, just to allow headroom for more stimulus to support the economy, Westpac said.

[North Korea] N. Korea says millions of leaflets readied against South (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [6/21/2020 5:59 PM, Staff, 12818K, Negative]

North Korea said on Monday it has readied thousands of balloons and millions of leaflets in preparation for "retaliatory punishment" against South Korea.

The detail, in a state media report, came a day after the North said it was preparing to begin an anti-South leaflet campaign following a series of vitriolic condemnations of Seoul because of anti-North leaflets floated over the border.

Defectors in the South send such leaflets which criticise the North's leader Kim Jong Un over human rights abuses and his nuclear ambitions. The messages are usually attached to balloons or floated in bottles.

Analysts have said North Korea has been conducting a series of staged provocations aimed at forcing concessions from Seoul and Washington.

"The preparations for the largest-ever distribution of leaflets against the enemy are almost complete," a report by the Korean Central News Agency said.

"Publishing and printing institutions at all levels in the capital city have turned out 12 million leaflets of all kinds reflective of the wrath and hatred of the people from all walks of life," it said.

More than "3,000 balloons of various types capable of scattering leaflets deep inside south Korea, have been prepared," along with other means of distribution, KCNA added.

- Sanctions relief -

Inter-Korean relations have been frozen for months, following the collapse of a summit in

Hanoi between Kim and US President Donald Trump early last year.

That meeting foundered on what the North would be willing to give up in exchange for a loosening of sanctions.

The nuclear-armed and impoverished North is subject to multiple United Nations Security Council sanctions over its banned weapons programmes.

The South's President Moon Jae-in initially brokered a dialogue between Pyongyang and Washington, but the North now blames him for not persuading the United States to relax sanctions.

"South Korea has to face the music. Only when it experiences how painful and how irritating it is to dispose of leaflets and waste, it will shake off its bad habit," KCNA said.

"The time for retaliatory punishment is drawing near."

As part of what analysts saw as staged provocations, the North last Tuesday blew up an inter-Korean liaison office on its side of the border, triggering broad international condemnation.

It has also threatened to bolster its military presence in and around the Demilitarized Zone.

The North's actions appear to be carefully calibrated, with Pyongyang drawing out the process by issuing multiple incremental warnings from different official sources -- leadership, government departments and the military -- ahead of each step it takes.

The North's two consecutive days of comment about its leaflet campaign came after Kim Yeon-chul, South Korea's point man for relations with the North, resigned over the heightened tensions. He expressed hope that his departure "will be a chance to pause for a bit".

Photos carried by the official Rodong Sinmun newspaper on Saturday showed North Koreans preparing the leaflets.

Seoul's unification ministry urged Pyongyang to withdraw the plan "immediately", calling it "very regrettable".

South Korea has also warned of a "thorough crackdown" against activists sending anti-North leaflets. It filed a police complaint against two defector groups over the messages that have offended Pyongyang.

The two Koreas remain technically at war after Korean War hostilities ended with an armistice in 1953 that was never replaced by a peace treaty.

[Taiwan] Taiwan boosts domestic defence development plan with new jet (Reuters)

Reuters [6/21/2020 11:40 PM, Ann Wang, 12818K, Neutral]

Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen oversaw the first public test flight of a new locally designed

and made advanced jet trainer on Monday, part of her government's plan to boost defences in the face of a growing challenge from China.

Taiwan's armed forces are mostly equipped by the United States, but Tsai has made development of an advanced home-grown defence industry a priority, especially as China, which claims the island as its own, steps up military modernisation efforts.

The new AT-5 Brave Eagle, made by state-owned Aerospace Industrial Development Corp with a budget of T\$68.6 billion, is the first jet made domestically since the F-CK-1 Ching-kuo fighter, rolled out more than three decades ago.

Speaking at an air base in the central city of Taichung, Tsai said the new aircraft disproved naysayers who thought Taiwan lacked the technology and should focus on meeting its defence needs from abroad.

"The new trainer aircraft not only has created more than 2,000 job opportunities, but will also pass on experiences and cultivate a new generation of aerospace industry technical talent," she said.

The single AT-5, flanked by a Ching-kuo fighter, made a 12-minute flight in front of Tsai.

Its first official test flight was earlier this month, less than a year after the prototype was unveiled.

The trainer can be equipped with weapons. Taiwan's air force plans on taking 66 units by 2026 to replace aging AT-3 and F-5 training aircraft.

The test flight came amid a stepped-up Chinese military presence near the democratic island.

Taiwan says China's air force has flown near it at least seven times in the last two weeks, the latest on Sunday.

Taiwan unveiled its largest defence spending increase in more than a decade last year, and the government is also developing new, domestically-made submarines.

South and Central Asia

[India] New Virus Hotspots Are Emerging in Rural Villages Across India (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [6/21/2020 5:00 PM, Bibhudatta Pradhan and Abhijit Roy Chowhury, 6400K, Negative]

After overwhelming India's megacities, the coronavirus is now moving through the country's vast hinterland.

Home to nearly 70% of India's 1.3 billion population, the nation's villages have little access to health care and are struggling to support themselves through the country's prolonged economic slowdown.

Initially isolated from the epidemic that has swamped the capital New Delhi and financial center Mumbai, rural areas were exposed when millions of migrant workers who lost their jobs in the cities when the government implemented a strict nationwide lockdown on March 25 went home.

The states of Bihar, Assam, Jharkhand, Odisha and Uttar Pradesh received the most number of returning laborers -- now they are also witnessing the sharpest rise in new cases in the two weeks to June 8, according to internal government estimates seen by Bloomberg. In the rural districts of Rajasthan and Karnataka, the virus is also spreading rapidly, it showed.

Infections have now spread to 98 of the country's 112 poorest rural districts, up from 34 on April 15, according to the report from NITI Aayog, the government's planning body. Nearly 2,250 new cases were added in those districts.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration runs the risk of a burgeoning death toll if the pandemic's spread is not checked in rural India, where under-funded health care infrastructure and poor living conditions provide fertile ground for the virus. India is already the world's fourth most affected country, and an exponential rise in cases in the villages could catapult it higher. With the crisis pushing the economy toward its first full-year contraction in more than four decades, the likelihood of increasing social unrest continues to grow.

The Prime Minister's Office didn't respond to an email seeking comment for this story.

In the agricultural Ganjam district in Odisha, the Choudhari Tikrapada village of 5,000 people was coronavirus free till the end of May.

That all changed when about 200 laborers returned home to the area after they lost their jobs in the states of Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu during the lockdown. They were quarantined for seven days before entering the village. Soon after 13 were found Covid-19 positive, prompting the administration to declare it a containment zone, stopping any movement of people.

"If tests are conducted in my village then more infected persons will be found," said villager Sadananda Sahu, adding it is impossible to maintain social distancing and hygiene in his area. "We are living in fear."

Districts like Ganjam are among India's poorest and have a skeletal health infrastructure, with most villagers accessing hospitals in nearby cities. India spent just 3.7% of gross domestic product on health care in 2016, putting it in the bottom 25 countries globally, according to the most recent World Bank data, leaving hospitals at risk of becoming quickly overwhelmed with virus cases.

All 33 rural districts in Rajasthan have also been affected, after more than 1.1 million laborers from cities including Mumbai, Pune and Ahmedabad came home in May, said Raghu Sharma, the desert state's health minister. "They came to their villages from highly infected places," said Sharma. "Thus it spread in the villages of Rajasthan."

The state has set up quarantine facilities in each village, deployed senior level officials to monitor them and formed village panels to check people's movement, Sharma said. The state has enough isolation beds, ICU rooms, and personal protective equipment to deal with the situation and was ramping up testing capacity to 40,000 per day from current 25,250 over the next two weeks, he said.

"Rural death rates for nearly all infectious conditions are considerably higher than in urban areas," said Prabhat Jha, professor at the University of Toronto, citing a study. He called on the government to release all de-identified data on positive tests so epidemiologists can better understand how the virus is traveling through India. "Had the lockdown been a true lockdown, with workers not being kicked out of their urban places of residence, the problem would not have spread," Jha said.

India's low testing rates over the last two months have added to the uncertainty. India had tested more than 6.8 million samples as of June 20, according to the Indian Council for Medical Research. The country has so far reported more than 410,000 infections and nearly 13,300 deaths, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.

The eastern state of Jharkhand has about 1,500 confirmed cases. Just 117 are from urban centers, while the rest are from rural areas, which witnessed a surge following arrival of people from outside the state, said Nitin Kulkarni, secretary of the health department. The authorities have worked to stop the spread by isolating infected people at quarantine centers, Kulkarni said on June 11.

About 5.7 million migrants have been shifted to various destinations across the country by special trains and a further 4.1 million by road transport, according to a government filing in the country's top court.

[India] Are more women dying of Covid-19 in India? (Yahoo News/BBC News)

Yahoo News/BBC News [6/21/2020 7:14 PM, Soutik Biswas, 12818K, Negative]

More men are dying from Covid-19 than women around the world, data shows.

In Italy, China and US, for example, more men have been infected, and a higher proportion of men have died.

Sabra Klein, a scientist who studies sex differences in viral infections at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, says "being male is as much a risk factor for the coronavirus as being old".

But something puzzling is happening in India.

New research by a group of scientists in India and US shows that although men make up the majority of infections, women face a higher risk of dying from the coronavirus than men.

The study, based on Covid-19 deaths in India until 20 May, shows early estimates that 3.3% of all women contracting the infection in India were dying compared to 2.9% of all men. (India had a caseload of more than 110,000 with 3,433 deaths and a fatality rate of 3.1% when the study was conducted.)

In the 40-49 age group, 3.2% of the infected women have died, compared to 2.1% of men. Only females have died in the 5-19 age group.

I asked SV Subramanian, a professor of population health at Harvard University and one of the leader authors of the study, what this implied.

He told me that the narrative of calculating the Covid-19 fatality rate by groups has conflated two key metrics - mortality risk and mortality burden.

Mortality risk measures the probability of death in a specific group- in this case, total number of deaths of women divided by confirmed infections among women.

On the other hand, mortality burden gives you the number of deaths among women as a percentage share of the total deaths, both men and women.

Prof Subramanian says for the large part, the statistics have looked at the latter - men having a greater share of total deaths (63% in India, hewing to international data) - but "inferred the former risk".

"Our overall conclusion is that, when infected, women do not seem to have any specific survival advantage [in India]," says Prof Subramanian.

"How much of this can be attributable to biological factors and how much of this is associated with social factors is unclear. Gender can be a critical factor in Indian settings," he says.

But the findings are certainly striking because they run counter to what has been observed elsewhere in the world.

For one, men are more likely to suffer from co-morbidities or underlying health conditions, like cardio-vascular disease and hypertension, says Kunihiro Matsushita, a professor of epidemiology at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

Men also smoke more than women in many countries, and some studies have shown that men wash their hands less frequently than women.

Prof Matsushita says that studies he had participated in had shown that male patients have a higher risk of contracting severe Covid-19 infection.

Scientists also believe that women have a lower mortality risk because of sturdier immune defences. And have hormones like oestrogen which has "beneficial effects on upper and lower airways and is associated with stimulation of the immune response to upper airway infections".

"In that regard, a higher case fatality rate in women than men in this report is certainly unique," Prof Matsushita told me.

But he says the research data needs to be scrutinised in the context of how Covid-19 is

diagnosed in India. "For example, is the opportunity to get a test same between men and women?" he wonders.

There could be more to this puzzle than what meets the eye.

Women outlive men in India and there are more older women than men. Is this leading to more deaths among women, as elderly people are vulnerable to the infection?

Also, women in India are more likely to delay going to doctors, and often self-medicate at home. And a woman's health is more likely to be ignored in a household. So are women arriving late for testing and treatment?

Homemaker caregivers are more prone to contracting the infection - during the 1918 Spanish flu more women in India - relatively undernourished, cooped up in unhygienic and ill-ventilated dwellings, and nursing the sick - died than men.

"We need to dissect the gender data to find out more about what's going on," says T Jacob John, a retired professor of virology at Christian Medical College, Vellore.

Researchers agree. "We will keep a close watch and keep updating the results," Prof Subramanian says.

[India] Many Indian citizens believe their government is trying to steal and sell their data. Here's why (CNN)

CNN [6/21/2020 8:49 PM, Priyali Sur, 12317K, Neutral]

When India launched its coronavirus tracing app Aarogya Setu in April, it came with a mandatory download order for public sector workers.

That order soon spread to private sector workers and then to people living in designated Covid-19 containment zones — including Rajeev Ghosh, a 50-year old chemist who resides in Noida, a city east of the capital New Delhi.

Back in May, he risked a six-month prison sentence or \$15 fine for refusing to download the app. Ghosh didn't care: He had bigger concerns about the future use of his data.

"I am not sure how the government will use my data. If they want, they can do surveillance on me forever through location-tracking on the app," said Ghosh.

Ghosh is not alone in his concerns. In Noida, privacy activists mounted a legal challenge to the mandatory download order, and by the end of May it was lifted. They argued that it breached personal liberties protected by a landmark Supreme Court ruling about the right to privacy in 2017.

The Indian government maintains that most personal and location data of users is ultimately deleted, but critics say India's lack of data protection laws exposes millions of people to potential privacy breaches. They also fear that personal information could be sold by the government to private companies, or even used for surveillance beyond Covid-19 concerns.

Millions of users

The Aarogya Setu app was developed by the National Informatics Centre, an ICT and e-governance body under the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, in collaboration with voluntary technical experts from private industry and academia.

By the beginning of June, it had been downloaded over 120 million times.

Unlike many other countries' contact tracing apps, Aarogya Setu uses Bluetooth and GPS location data to monitor the app users' movement and proximity to other people.

Users are asked to input their name, phone number, age, gender, profession and the countries they have visited in the past 30 days, as well as prior health conditions and a self-assessment about any Covid-19-related symptoms.

A unique digital ID (DiD) is generated for each user, which is used for all future app-related transactions. Through GPS, the app records each users' location every 15 minutes.

When two registered users come within Bluetooth range of each other, their apps automatically exchange DiDs and record the time and location. If one of the users tests positive for Covid-19, the information is uploaded from their phone onto the Indian government's server and used for contact tracing.

In an analysis of 25 apps, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) gave Aarogya Setu just two out of five stars, largely because it collects far more data than it needs. For comparison, Singapore's TraceTogether app earned 5 stars and uses Bluetooth alone.

As of June 1st, Aarogya Setu had identified 200,000 at-risk people and 3,500 Covid-19 hotspots, according to lead developer Lalitesh Katragadda, the founder of Indihood, a private firm that builds crowdsourcing population-scale platforms, and one of the private industry volunteers who worked with government agencies on the app.

"We have a 24% efficacy rate, that is, 24% of all the people estimated to have Covid-19 because of the app have tested positive," said Katragadda. This means that only about 1 in 4 people advised by the app to get a test actually tests positive.

Subhashis Bannerjee, professor of computer science and engineering at the Indian Institute of Technology, New Delhi, said the combination of Bluetooth and GPS location would likely return a higher rate of false positives and false negatives. For example, GPS is often unavailable or unreliable indoors, and Bluetooth overestimates the risks in large open spaces, across walls and floors, which radio waves can penetrate but the virus cannot.

"There seems to be a leap of faith from GPS colocation and Bluetooth radio proximity to estimating a risk score for infection transmission," he wrote in a report for the Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF), a non-governmental organization that advocates for digital rights, which has mounted a legal challenge against the mandatory download order in Kerala High Court.

The Indian government states that enough privacy and protection parameters have been

built in to ensure permanent deletion of the app's data.

"All contact tracing and location data on the phone is deleted on a rolling 30-day cycle. The same data on the server is deleted 45 days from the upload unless you test positive. In which case all contact tracing and location information is deleted after 60 days after being declared cured," said Abhishek Singh, CEO of MyGov at India's IT ministry.

However, the Aarogya Setu Data Access and Knowledge Sharing Protocol states that de-identified (anonymous) data can be shared with any government ministry or institution, as long as it's for the purpose of tackling Covid-19. Any data received should be permanently deleted after 180 days, the protocol says. But privacy campaigners say there's no way of knowing if that's happened.

"There is no way to check and verify whether the complete destruction of data has taken place and if any third parties with whom the data is shared has also destroyed it," said Apar Gupta, a lawyer and executive director of the IFF.

In response to calls for more transparency, the Indian government opened up the app's source code on May 27 and announced a bug bounty program to incentivize software experts to find security vulnerabilities in the app, to rectify lapses, if any.

"This is a step in the right direction but to know the full picture of who has access to the data, we need the server code also," said Robert Baptiste, an ethical hacker who goes by the alias of Elliot Alderson and exposed security flaws in the app soon after its launch. An open server code would enable experts to see what citizen data is stored in the government server and how the data is shared.

On June 1, Singh of MyGov, said the government planned to release the server code in a few weeks.

However, Katragadda said that even with the server code, access to information on data sharing would be restricted.

"It will never be possible to see exactly with whom the data is shared because for that we will have to open source the entire government," he said.

No data protection laws

One of the main concerns that activists have is that India does not have a data protection law, though a bill is currently being reviewed by a joint select committee and could be passed later this year.

The Personal Data Protection Bill imposes limits on how residents' personal data is used, processed and stored. If passed, the bill would also establish a new regulatory body — the Data Protection Authority (DPA) — to monitor compliance. Critics say the bill is flawed for a number of reasons, including that it allows the government to exempt its departments from the legislation on the basis of national security.

But right now, there are few safeguards for data in India.

"No legislative framework means no official level of accountability. So, if any data mishap happens, there will be no penalty, there will be no safeguards," said Gupta.

There's also a financial incentive for the government to share information. The National Economic Survey of India 2018-19 openly states that the Indian government will monetize citizens' data and sell it to private companies to generate revenue.

"India has made a strategy to sell citizen data and is thus making it a commodity by claiming ownership over Indians' personal data, which is against Indians' fundamental right to privacy," said Kodali, the public interest technologist.

Last year, the Modi government sold citizens' vehicular registration and driving license data to 87 private companies for 65 crore rupees (approximately \$8.7 million) without citizens' consent. This caused a backlash with the opposition party questioning the motives of the government and the price of the sale in parliament.

Despite the government's assurances that all Aarogya Setu data will be deleted, Katragadda told CNN Business that some information from the app will be automatically transferred to the National Health Stack (NHS). The NHS is a cloud-based health registry, currently under development, that will include citizens' medical history, insurance coverage and claims.

"Any residual data from the Aarogya Setu app will automatically move into the National Health Stack within the consent architecture, as soon as the health stack comes into effect," said Katragadda.

Residual data means any data that's still on the govt server at the time the NHS becomes active. That includes location, health and personal data that has been downloaded to the server but hasn't yet been deleted in the timeframes laid out by the government, Katragadda said.

No date has been set for the release of the NHS, but Gupta of IFF worries, again, that there's no legal framework to protect the data.

"Even though it is repeatedly stated that consent will be the basis of the information sharing, it's important to note that in both the Aarogya Setu app and NHS, consent is baked into the architecture which is a technical framework rather than a clear source of legal authority."

Like other countries that have introduced a contact tracing app, India says the technology is vital to stop the virus from spreading. As of June 22, the country had confirmed more than 410,000 cases and 13,254 deaths.

Air passengers are encouraged to download the app before flights, rail passengers need it for train travel, and some workers have been told they need it to do their jobs.

But digital rights activists say the app carries more risks than it's worth, especially in a country where fewer than 35% of people have the cellphones able to support it.

Citizens and activists also fear function creep of the app, meaning that information obtained through the app could be linked to other services.

"In the past we have seen that technology interventions by this government such as the Aadhar program, which was initially built to ensure that everyone has a digital identity, became a pervasive system, said Gupta.

"Initially built for the purposes of accessing government benefits and subsidies, it was soon mandated for opening bank accounts, availing mobile numbers and going about your business."

Gupta is referring to Aadhaar, a biometric database introduced in 2009, initially as a voluntary program to prevent benefit fraud. Now, it contains the fingerprints and iris scans of more than one billion Indians. Users receive a 12-digit identity number that is used to access welfare payments and other government-controlled services.

However, in 2018 a journalist discovered a security breach which disclosed citizens' personal details. The government introduced new security measures, but the scandal eroded trust in its ability to keep data safe.

Before easing off its compulsory download order, India was the only democratic country that made it mandatory for millions of citizens to download the app. The only other countries to impose a similar order were Turkey and China. Campaigners say that alone is cause for concern.

"When it comes to technology and public use, the world's largest democracy is drawing from China's playbook — using national security or a public health crisis to build a digital model of data-gathering, oversight and surveillance," said Vidushi Marda, a lawyer working on emerging technology and human rights.

China's Covid-19 app, initially designed for contact-tracing during the pandemic, is now being stitched into a social credit system in some places, where the app is used to track an individual's exercise, alcohol and smoking intake, and sleep hours.

"I would say these kinds of complex technical architectures are not happening in a collective fashion in India, but there is a danger they will be built in through platforms like the National Health Stack," said Gupta.

Western Hemisphere Affairs

[Argentina] Argentina's Buenos Aires Province extends debt revamp deadline to July 31 (Reuters)

Reuters [6/21/2020 6:07 PM, Staff, 5304K, Neutral]

Argentina's Buenos Aires province has extended the deadline for debt restructuring talks with its creditors to July 31, the government said in a statement on Sunday.

Argentina's largest province is negotiating with bondholders on the restructuring of \$7.148 billion in debt.

"Talks with the main creditors that have not yet accepted the proposal are ongoing and in the coming weeks it is anticipated that progress will be made," the statement said.

"The province will continue making all efforts within its reach to find a solution that preserves the sustainability of the debt," it said.

On June 4 the provincial government extended its previous debt restructuring deadline until June 19.

Ratings agency S&P Global Ratings on June 17 cut its rating on Buenos Aires' global bond due in 2027 to "D" from "CC", after the province missed a \$68.9 million interest payment.

S&P said it did not expect the payment even in the 30-day grace period.

[Bolivia] Bolivia president signs off on September elections despite virus fears (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [6/21/2020 10:48 PM, Staff, 12818K, Neutral]

Bolivia's interim president Jeanine Anez signed into law Sunday a bill calling for general elections on September 6 after criticism over her reluctance to hold a vote during the coronavirus pandemic.

The conservative leader assumed the presidency in November after her predecessor Evo Morales fled the country following three weeks of protests over his controversial re-election to an unconstitutional fourth term.

She had been under pressure to ratify a bill to set a new date for elections, originally scheduled for May 3 but postponed because of the public health emergency.

"I have received pressure demanding elections on September 6, that is, in the midst of the pandemic. I have a country suffering and many politicians and authorities demanding elections as soon as possible," she said in a recorded message.

Anez rejected accusations that she intends to remain in power and demanded that Morales, his chosen successor Luis Arce and fellow candidate Carlos Mesa "assume with courage the responsibility they have for demanding so insistently that we hold elections in the midst of a pandemic."

The three men have yet to respond.

Both chambers of Congress approved the bill setting September 6 as the new date last week, despite her party abstaining from the vote.

But Anez had resisted signing the bill into law, arguing it would coincide with the worst moment for the spread of the pandemic and would put the health of citizens at risk.

Health minister Eidy Roca told reporters Sunday that Bolivia would reach a peak of 130,000 infections by mid-September

The country recorded more than 1,000 daily cases for the first time on Saturday, bringing the total number of confirmed infections to 23,512.

[Brazil] Brazil passes 50,000 coronavirus deaths as outbreak worsens (Reuters)

Reuters [6/21/2020 6:43 PM, Gabriel Stargardter, 5304K, Negative]

Brazil, the world's No. 2 coronavirus hot spot after the United States, officially passed 50,000 coronavirus deaths on Sunday, a blow for a country already grappling with more than 1 million cases, rising political instability and a crippled economy.

Brazil now has a total of 1,085,038 confirmed cases and 50,617 deaths, up from 49,976 on Saturday, the Health Ministry said. Experts say the true numbers are a lot higher because of a lack of widespread testing. Latin America's largest country has typically recorded more than 1,000 deaths a day, but usually registers fewer on the weekends.

Brazil confirmed its first case of the novel coronavirus on Feb. 26 and passed 1 million cases on Friday. Since first arriving in the country, the virus' rapid spread has eroded support for right-wing President Jair Bolsonaro and has raised fears of economic collapse after years of anemic growth.

Bolsonaro, sometimes called the "Tropical Trump," has been widely criticized for his handling of the crisis. The country still has no permanent health minister after losing two since April, following clashes with the president.

Bolsonaro has shunned social distancing, calling it a job-killing measure more dangerous than the virus itself. He has also promoted two anti-malarial drugs as remedies, chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine, despite little evidence they work.

On Sunday, Bolsonaro said the military serves the will of the people and its mission is to defend democracy, adding fuel to a raging debate about the armed forces' role amid rumbling fears of political fragility.

His comments came on the same day his supporters and detractors gathered in cities across the country, in a stark symbol of the polarization in Latin America's largest country.

[Brazil] Coronavirus: Brazil becomes second country to pass 50,000 deaths (Yahoo News/BBC News)

Yahoo News/BBC News [6/21/2020 8:18 PM, Staff, 12818K, Negative]

Brazil has become the second country, after the US, to register more than 50,000 deaths from Covid-19.

The grim milestone comes amid growing political unrest and days after the country confirmed more than one million coronavirus infections.

Experts warn that the peak of the outbreak in Brazil is still weeks away.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has recorded the biggest one-day increase in cases, with the Americas responsible for most of the new infections.

Of the 183,000 new cases reported in 24 hours, more than 60% were from North and South America, the agency said.

However, the growing outbreak did not stop thousands of supporters and opponents of Brazil's far-right President Jair Bolsonaro from taking to the streets in rival protests on Sunday.

Anti-government demonstrators are calling for Mr Bolsonaro to be impeached. It follows the arrest on Thursday of a former aide and family friend who is accused of corruption.

His supporters say Congress and the Supreme Court are trying to curb his powers.

Mr Bolsonaro has also been heavily criticised for his response to the coronavirus outbreak. He has opposed lockdowns and openly disagreed with advice from his government's own health ministry.

On Sunday, the ministry announced that 641 more deaths had been registered in the past 24 hours, taking the total to 50,617. Over the same period it also registered more than 17,000 new infections.

Only the US has fared worse, with 2.2 million cases and nearly 120,000 deaths.

Mr Bolsonaro argues that the economic impact of the measures will be much bigger than the virus itself, a position shared by many. But his overall approach to the crisis has led to the resignation of two doctors as health minister.

There was no national lockdown, but states and cities adopted their own measures. After months of restrictions, some are slowly being lifted, even though infection levels remain high.

There is still concern that the health system will be unable to cope in some places, and that the disease is spreading faster in deprived neighbourhoods and remote areas, such as indigenous communities, where access to adequate care is difficult.

As well as the pandemic, Mr Bolsonaro is facing a growing political crisis. He is under investigation for allegedly trying to interfere with the police for political motives, which he denies, while the Supreme Court is carrying out two separate inquiries into his allies.

On Sunday, police in the capital, Brasilia, kept rival groups apart as they marched outside Congress and the Supreme Court buildings.

Other large gatherings took place in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro.

[Mexico] Mexico catches alleged gang boss relatives; gang burns cars (AP)

AP [6/21/2020 6:28 PM, Staff, Negative]

Mexican security officials said Sunday they have arrested the mother and sister of an alleged crime gang boss along with 24 other people, prompting a wave of violence in the

central state of Guanajuato.

The army said an operation involving both state and federal officials captured the two family members of José Antonio Yépez Ortiz, known as "El Marro," alleged leader of the Santa Rosa de Lima Cartel, on Saturday.

Enraged members of the gang blocked highways and set cars and trucks ablaze along roads in the state and Yépez Ortiz threatened further disturbances in a video distributed to local news media.

"They humiliated and did what they want with the family and I am going to be a stone in their shoe," he said.

The gang began by robbing trains and expanded into stealing gasoline from government pipelines, and has branched out into extortion rackets, often clashing with a growing drug gang, the Jalisco New Generation Cartel as far afield as Cancun on the Caribbean coast.

Analysts say the confrontation is a key reason for a soaring number of homicides in Guanajuato, once one of Mexico's safer states and home to numerous foreign-owned manufacturing plants.

Meanwhile, authorities in the northwestern state of Sonora said a series of clashes in the municipality of Caborca left at least 12 men dead. Officials said they were found with their hands bound and they had been shot.

[Panama] Panama exhumes remains of 19 victims from 1989 US invasion (Yahoo News/BBC News)

Yahoo News/BBC News [6/21/2020 9:07 PM, Staff, 12818K, Negative]

The remains of 19 victims of the 1989 US invasion of Panama have been exhumed from a cemetery as part of an official investigation into the operation.

About 500 Panamanians are believed to have died in the invasion, but rights groups say the true number is higher.

The remains of the 19 victims were initially placed into a mass grave but later reburied in the Jardín de Paz cemetery in Panama City, along with dozens of others.

Some bodies remain unidentified.

Relatives say all the victims of the invasion must be identified so that families can find closure.

"We have been working for 30 years to make sure they have some inner peace," said Trinidad Ayola, president of an association that is helping to identify the victims.

The government of Juan Carlos Varela has set up a commission to investigate the death toll. Correspondents say the invasion is still a difficult period for many in Panama and there have been calls for 20 December to be an official day of mourning.

The invasion took place on 20 December 1989 after ties between the US government and Panamanian leader General Manuel Noriega sank to an all time low.

Then US President George H W Bush said he was ordering military action to "protect the lives of American citizens" and bring Noriega "to justice".

General Noriega was arrested two weeks later. He was taken to the US where he was sentenced to jail for drug trafficking and money laundering.

Noriega spent the rest of his life in custody - first in the US, then France and finally under house arrest in Panama. He died in 2017, aged 83, as a result of complications from an operation to remove a brain tumour.

[Peru] Machu Picchu July reopening ruled out over fears of virus spread (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [6/21/2020 4:29 PM, Staff, 12818K, Neutral]

The ancient Inca citadel of Machu Picchu, a jewel of Peruvian tourism, will not reopen in July as originally scheduled due to concerns over the coronavirus, local media reported Sunday.

The Machu Picchu management group, UGM, made the decision based on reports from authorities in the Cusco region, where the citadel is located.

"It has been decided that it will not be opened on July 1," Machu Picchu district mayor Darwin Baca, a UGM member, told reporters.

An official reopening date has not yet been set. Baca indicated that a series of health measures, such as testing, are still pending in the area.

Machu Picchu unions have since Monday protested the reopening, saying that allowing tourists in the region would cause a spike in infections.

Peruvian officials announced last week that the citadel would be allowed to reopen to a sharply reduced number of daily visitors: only 675 per day, one-quarter the usual number.

Guides would lead tours of only seven visitors, and people would be required to wear masks.

The planned July reopening was linked to a lifting of national confinement measures in place since March 16, Cusco regional governor Paul Benavente said.

Airports in Peru remain closed, and many shops are shuttered. But despite some of Latin America's earliest and most stringent measures, the country has logged the second-highest number of cases in the region, at 250,000, along with nearly 8,000 deaths.

[Venezuela] High Court battle over £800m of Venezuelan gold in Bank of England vaults (Yahoo News/PA Media)

Yahoo News/PA Media [6/21/2020 9:45 PM, Sam Tobin, 12818K, Neutral]

A battle over one billion US dollars (£800 million) of Venezuelan gold held in the Bank of England's vaults is set to be heard by the High Court.

Banco Central de Venezuela (BCV) is taking legal action to release the gold bullion held on its behalf, which it wants to sell to help tackle the country's coronavirus crisis.

BCV says it has agreed to transfer the funds to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to buy "healthcare equipment, medicines and basic foodstuffs" to address the Covid-19 emergency in Venezuela.

But the Bank of England (BoE) says it is "caught in the middle" of rival claims to the gold: by the BCV board appointed by Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro and an "ad hoc" board appointed by opposition leader Juan Guaido, who has asked the BoE not to "act on instructions from the Maduro board".

A four-day hearing to decide who the UK Government formally recognises as the president of Venezuela will begin on Monday.

Mr Maduro became president of Venezuela following the death of Hugo Chavez in 2013 and was sworn in for a second term last year amid claims of vote-rigging in 2018's election, which was boycotted by opposition parties.

In February 2019, then Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt announced that the Government recognised Mr Guaido, the head of Venezuela's National Assembly, as "the constitutional interim president of Venezuela until credible presidential elections can be held".

Lawyers for Mr Guaido – who is recognised by the US and more than 50 other nations – say he is therefore "entitled to assert Venezuela's claim to the gold" held by the BoE.

But, in a statement ahead of the hearing, the BCV's solicitor Sarosh Zaiwalla accused the BoE of "holding Venezuela's gold in a politically motivated move" to support US President Donald Trump's "foreign policy objectives in Venezuela".

He referred to an upcoming book by former US national security adviser John Bolton which claims Mr Hunt was "delighted to co-operate" with the US on "freezing Venezuelan gold deposits in the Bank of England, so the regime could not sell the gold to keep itself going".

Mr Bolton's book – which is due to be published on Tuesday after a US federal judge dismissed the White House's attempt to block its release – also claims Mr Trump said it would be "cool" to invade Venezuela and that the country was "really part of the United States".

Mr Zaiwalla said the BCV had negotiated with the UNDP "to ensure all funds raised by the sale of Venezuelan gold will be used in the fight against Covid-19", but that the BoE's "continued intransigence is putting lives at risk".

He added: "This money is now needed to save lives."

"It will not be used by the Maduro regime and will instead go directly to aid efforts to slow the spread of Covid-19 in the country.

"The Bank of England should stop fighting and release this money now, before more lives are lost."

Before the hearing, Mr Guaido's chief overseas legal representative Jose Ignacio Hernandez told Reuters that "recognition from the court would be a very important precedent" in relation to other Venezuelan assets, including a reported 5 billion US dollars frozen in foreign bank accounts.

The hearing before Mr Justice Teare, which will be conducted remotely via Skype, will take place over four days and it is expected that the court will reserve its judgment.

Sub-Saharan Africa

Coronavirus lockdowns increase poaching in Asia, Africa (AP)

AP [6/22/2020 12:30 AM, Aniruddha Ghosal and Michael Casey, Neutral]

A camera trap photo of an injured tigress and a forensic examination of its carcass revealed why the creature died: a poacher's wire snare punctured its windpipe and sapped its strength as the wound festered for days.

Snares like this one set in southern India's dense forest have become increasingly common amid the coronavirus pandemic, as people left jobless turn to wildlife to make money and feed their families.

Authorities in India are concerned this spike in poaching not only could kill more endangered tigers and leopards but also species these carnivores depend upon to survive.

"It is risky to poach, but if pushed to the brink, some could think that these are risks worth taking," said Mayukh Chatterjee, a wildlife biologist with the non-profit Wildlife Trust of India.

Since the country announced its lockdown, at least four tigers and six leopards have been killed by poachers, Wildlife Protection Society of India said. But there also were numerous other poaching casualties — gazelles in grasslands, foot-long giant squirrels in forests, wild boars and birds such as peacocks and purple morhens.

In many parts of the developing world, coronavirus lockdowns have sparked concern about increased illegal hunting that's fueled by food shortages and a decline in law enforcement in some wildlife protection areas. At the same time, border closures and travel restrictions slowed illegal trade in certain high-value species.

One of the biggest disruptions involves the endangered pangolin. Often caught in parts of Africa and Asia, the anteater-like animals are smuggled mostly to China and Southeast Asia, where their meat is considered a delicacy and scales are used in traditional medicine.

In April, the Wildlife Justice Commission reported traders were stockpiling pangolin scales in several Southeast Asia countries awaiting an end to the pandemic.

Rhino horn is being stockpiled in Mozambique, the report said, and ivory traders in Southeast Asia are struggling to sell the stockpiles amassed since China's 2017 ban on trade in ivory products. The pandemic compounded their plight because many Chinese customers were unable to travel to ivory markets in Cambodia, Laos and other countries.

"They are desperate to get it off their hands. Nobody wants to be stuck with that product," said Sarah Stoner, director of intelligence for the commission.

The illegal trade in pangolins continued "unabated" within Africa but international trade has been disrupted by port closures, said Ray Jansen, chairman of the African Pangolin Working Group.

"We have witnessed some trade via air while major ship routes are still closed but we expect a flood of trade once shipping avenues reopen again," Jansen said.

Fears that organized poaching in Africa would spike largely have not materialized — partly because ranger patrols have continued in many national parks and reserves.

Emma Stokes, director of the Central Africa Program of the Wildlife Conservation Society, said patrolling national parks in several African countries has been designated essential work.

But she has heard about increased hunting of animals outside parks. "We are expecting to see an increase in bushmeat hunting for food — duikers, antelopes and monkeys," she said.

Jansen also said bushmeat poaching was soaring, especially in parts of southern Africa. "Rural people are struggling to feed themselves and their families," he said.

There are also signs of increased poaching in parts of Asia.

A greater one-horned rhino was gunned down May 9 in India's Kaziranga National Park -- the first case in over a year. Three people, suspected to be a part of an international poaching ring, were arrested on June 1 with automatic rifles and ammunition, said Uttam Saikia, a wildlife warden.

As in other parts of the world, poachers in Kaziranga pay poor families paltry sums of money to help them. With families losing work from the lockdown, "they will definitely take advantage of this," warned Saikia.

In neighboring Nepal, where the virus has ravaged important income from migrants and tourists, the first month of lockdown saw more forest-related crimes, including poaching and illegal logging, than the previous 11 months, according to a review by the government and World Wildlife Fund or WWF.

For many migrants returning to villages after losing jobs, forests were the "easiest source" of sustenance, said Shiv Raj Bhatta, director of programs at WWF Nepal.

In Southeast Asia, the Wildlife Conservation Society documented in April the poisoning in

Cambodia of three critically endangered giant ibises for the wading bird's meat. More than 100 painted stork chicks were also poached in late March in Cambodia at the largest waterbird colony in Southeast Asia.

"Suddenly rural people have little to turn to but natural resources and we're already seeing a spike in poaching," said Colin Poole, the group's regional director for the Greater Mekong.

Heartened by closure of wildlife markets in China over concerns about a possible link between the trade and the coronavirus, several conservation groups are calling for governments to put measures in place to avoid future pandemics. Among them is a global ban on commercial sale of wild birds and mammals destined for the dinner table.

Others say an international treaty, known as CITES, which regulates the trade in endangered plants and animals, should be expanded to incorporate public health concerns. They point out that some commonly traded species, such as horseshoe bats, often carry viruses but are currently not subject to trade restrictions under CITES.

"That is a big gap in the framework," said John Scanlon, former Secretary-General of CITES now with African Parks. "We may find that there may be certain animals that should be listed and not be traded or traded under strict conditions and certain markets that ought to be closed."

[Zambia] U.S. farming body and Zambian firm partner aim to boost crop yields (Reuters)

Reuters [6/21/2020 9:00 PM, Chris Mfula, Neutral]

An American non-profit organisation has launched a \$40 million joint venture with one of Zambia's top farm suppliers to boost crop yields and food security as farmers struggle to access finance amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the local company said on Sunday.

The chairman of African Green Resources (AGR), Zuneid Yousuf, said the private sector deal with U.S.-based African Fertiliser and Agribusiness Partnership (AFAP) included a scheme supporting 250,000 mainly subsistence farmers to double their maize yields and help feed around 10 million people in Zambia and the southern African region.

"AFAP's role is not only sourcing fertiliser guarantees and credit lines, but to also act as an adviser for downstream activities like value addition," Yousuf told Reuters in his Lusaka offices.

Credit packages for seed, fertiliser and training will be provided to the farmers, while plans are also being made to use soya beans and maize to produce animal stock feed, among other products, Yousuf said.

In the 2018/2019 crop season, Zambia's national average yield rate for maize was 2.52 tonnes per hectare, far below Egypt at 8 tonnes and South Africa at 4 tonnes.

Zambia's 2019/2020 season maize production is projected to increase to over 3.3 million tonnes from around 2 million tonnes in the previous season but is still below potential, Yousuf said. [nL8N2D948V]

The southern African nation is rebuilding an agriculture sector hit hard by a recent drought, with small-scale subsistence farmers who produce over 90% of Zambia's maize, losing access to markets and seeing a dip in productivity as they battle the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Zambia has reported 1,416 confirmed coronavirus cases and 11 deaths.

Network TV News Coverage

Coronavirus Spreads Worldwide as Some Countries Reopen (CBS Weekend News)

(B) CBS Weekend News [6/21/2020 8:11 PM, Staff]

Spain reopened its borders to tourists this weekend as COVID-19 infections across Europe continue to fall, but in some places the coronavirus is making a comeback. In Beijing, health workers tested thousands of delivery drivers to try to stamp out coronavirus again. It was declared gone in early June, and then it came back, underlining just how tenacious this infection really is. The latest grim milestone in the pandemic came late last week when the WHO reported the largest number of cases in a single day: 150,000 of them. Half of them are in the Americas. In Brazil, the peak of infections is still weeks away, but they are seeing 50,000 cases per day. The rush to ease lockdowns in India may have helped the economy but it has also helped the virus. New Delhi is now converting train carriages into makeshift COVID wards. The Kremlin also lifted its lockdown this month and then staged rehearsals for its Victory Day parade, but all the weapons in the world didn't stop Russia from racking up the third largest COVID infections on the planet or defend the 500 doctors and nurses who died fighting it.

Iranian Officials Say Cargo Ship With Food Docked in Venezuela (CBS News)

(B) CBS News [6/21/2020 5:05 PM, Staff]

Iranian officials say one of their cargo ships is docking in Venezuela with food to launch the first Iranian supermarket in the South American nation. Both countries are foes of President Trump and both are heavily sanctioned by the United States. Their ties have been increasing lately.

[United Kingdom] Prime Minister Boris Johnson Says Full-Scale Investigation into Reading Stabbing (CBS News)

(B) CBS News [6/21/2020 6:03 PM, Staff]

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson says there is a full-scale investigation underway into the deadly stabbing in Reading. "We now have someone in custody. The police must get on with their job, get to the bottom of exactly what happened," Johnson said. Officials say a lone assailant killed three people in a park, and it's being treated as a terrorist attack. A 25-year-old was detained. There are reported he is a Libyan refugee who has been granted asylum in Britain.

[China] Trump Avoided Sanctions Over Uyghur Camps To Save Trade Deal (CNN's The Situation Room With Wolf Blitzer)

(B) CNN's The Situation Room With Wolf Blitzer [6/21/2020 8:45 PM, Staff]

President Trump told Axios News he delayed sanctions against Chinese officials involved with detention camps for Uyghurs and other minorities because doing so would interfere

with his trade deal with China's government. Trump told Axios that he put tariffs on China, which he says are far worse than any sanction. CNN correspondent Vivian Salama said that the President has favored tariffs because he thinks it gives him leverage in his economic and trade negotiations. Sanctions, on the other hand, she says, are a political tool with much larger ramifications. Trump was addressing allegations that China has been rounding up Muslim minorities in China's western region on an almost industrial scale. There is an estimated 1 million people thrown into this network of internment camps. Tensions are at a high right now because of coronavirus. The administration has directed its blame for a lack of response by China, including alerting the WHO in a timely manner and covering up the spread of the virus. This tension has put at risk the trade deal that was negotiated between the two countries. It has yet to be seen how the deal will play out and if it will be as successful as the administration originally intended.

[Afghanistan] UN Raises Concerns Over Deliberate Attacks on Healthcare Workers in Afghanistan (CBS News)

(B) CBS News [6/21/2020 6:03 PM, Staff]

A new United Nations special report raises concerns over what it says are recent deliberate attacks against health care workers and facilities in Afghanistan. The attacks, which the UN says constitutes a war crime, are also occurring as the country struggles with the coronavirus outbreak. One recent attack was on a Kabul maternity ward.

Headlines

The Washington Post

(6/22/2020 6:00 AM)

Virus cuts through Mexican market At market, virus's brutality is clear

Experts upset by Trump's virus testing comments

Young allies push parents to understand call for change

'Heroes, right? The anger is blinding.'

The New York Times

(6/22/2020 6:00 AM)

Vast Federal Aid Has Capped Rise in Poverty, Studies Find

For Barr, Standoff With Prosecutor Adds to String of Miscues

8 Hospitals in 15 Hours: A Pregnant Woman's Crisis in the Pandemic

The Lapses That Let a Saudi Extremist Shoot Up a U.S. Navy Base

Roosevelt Statue to Be Removed From Museum of Natural History

The Wall Street Journal

(6/22/2020 6:00 AM)

Trump Administration Move Disrupts U.S. Attorney's Office in Manhattan

Cash Remains King as Companies Close a Dismal Second Quarter

Efforts for Coronavirus Vaccine Focus on Vulnerable Group: Older Adults

George Floyd and Derek Chauvin: The Lives of the Victim and His Killer

Fake Countries Have a Hard Time Dealing with the Pandemic, Too

ABC News

(6/22/2020 6:00 AM)

Iran sends shipment of food to Venezuela in latest delivery

8 young children drown in river in southwestern Chinese city

Ruling populist party claims landslide win in Serbia vote

CBS News

(6/22/2020 6:00 AM)

Spain lifts national state of emergency after 3-month coronavirus lockdown

3 killed and 3 seriously injured in U.K. stabbing

Trump draws criticism for suggesting a slowdown in coronavirus testing

CNN

(6/22/2020 6:00 AM)

Belarus strongman faces mass protests after jailing of his main rivals

The greatest trick racism ever pulled was convincing England it doesn't exist'

Three activists say they were abducted by security forces after protesting. The government says they faked it, and put them in jail

Fox News

(6/22/2020 6:00 AM)

Coronavirus weakening, may disappear on its own, Italian doctor says

UK stabbing attack that left 3 dead being treated as terror incident, police say

Drug checks in German city spark riot; storefronts smashed, police attacked

NBC News

(6/22/2020 6:00 AM)

WHO reports largest single-day increase in coronavirus cases

Afghan healthcare personnel were deliberately attacked during pandemic, U.N. says

DHS secretary says U.S. is 'doing a great job' at reopening despite coronavirus spikes

Washington Schedule

President

The White House

(6/22/2020 6:00 AM)

10:00 AM In-House Pool Call Time

11:00 AM The Vice President leads a Governors' video teleconference on COVID-19 response and recovery

1:00 PM The Vice President joins The President for lunch

Vice President

The White House

(6/22/2020 6:00 AM)

See source link. Schedule not yet available.

Senate

Senate

(6/22/2020 6:00 AM)

3:00 p.m.: Convene and proceed to executive session to resume consideration of the nomination of Cory T. Wilson to be United States Circuit Judge for the Fifth Circuit.

House of Representatives

House of Representatives

(6/22/2020 6:00 AM)

11:00 AM | 2118 Rayburn HOB

Markup: H.R. 6395 - National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021

Host: Committee on Armed Services Subcommittee on Intelligence and Emerging Threats and Capabilities

12:00 PM | via Webex

Hearing: Inequities Exposed: How COVID-19 Widened Racial Inequities in Education Health and the Workforce.

Host: Committee on Education Labor

1:00 PM | 2118 Rayburn HOB

Markup: H.R. 6395 - National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021

Host: Committee on Armed Services Subcommittee on Strategic Forces

{End of Report}

Sender:

(b)(6)

@state.gov>

Recipient: Legal-L-Attorneys-DL <Legal-L-Attorneys-DL@state.gov>

2020	Peng Zhou, Xing-Lou Yang, et al. "Discovery of a Novel Coronavirus Associated with the Recent Pneumonia Outbreak in Humans and Its Potential Bat Origin." <i>BioRxiv</i> , Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, 1 Jan. 2020, www.biorxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.01.22.914952v1.full .	Sequences 2019-nCoV samples from patients, highlighting similarities to SARS-CoV, a bat CoV from Yunnan, and its cell entry receptor.
2019	Li, Hongying, et al. "Human-animal interactions and bat coronavirus spillover potential among rural residents in Southern China." <i>Biosafety and Health</i> 1.2 (2019): 84-90.	Serological testing of Southern Chinese residents for bat coronaviruses – highlights evidence of bat CoV spillover in rural communities in Southern China.
2019	Wan, Yushun, et al. "Molecular mechanism for antibody-dependent enhancement of coronavirus entry." <i>Journal of Virology</i> (2019).	Revealed a novel molecular mechanism for Ab-enhanced viral entry to "guide future vaccination and antiviral strategies".
2019	Walls, Alexandra C., et al. "Unexpected receptor functional mimicry elucidates activation of coronavirus fusion." <i>Cell</i> 176.5 (2019): 1026-1039.	Tested host cell response to SARS and MERS with Ab from survivors. Only SARS-CoV-Ab conformationally changed S protein.
2019	Lim, Xiao Fang, et al. "Detection and characterization of a novel bat-borne coronavirus in Singapore using multiple molecular approaches." <i>Journal of General Virology</i> 100.10 (2019): 1363-1374.	Discovery and sequence of a bat CoV in Singapore closely related to species found in Guangdong and Yunnan provinces.
2019	Li, Ya, et al. "Bat adeno-associated viruses as gene therapy vectors with the potential to evade human neutralizing antibodies." <i>Gene therapy</i> 26.6 (2019): 264.	Examined using capsid genes from bat adeno-associated virus to resist human antibody neutralization of AAV after IM injection.
2019	Zhang, Wei, et al. "Serological evidence of MERS-CoV and HKU8-related CoV co-infection in Kenyan camels." <i>Emerging microbes & infections</i> 8.1 (2019): 1528-1534.	Found bat CoV antibodies in Kenyan camels indicating coinfection with

		MERS-CoV and a bat CoV.
2019	Wang, Ning, et al. "Characterization of a New Member of Alphacoronavirus with Unique Genomic Features in Rhinolophus Bats." <i>Viruses</i> 11.4 (2019): 379.	Discovered new alpha CoV and tested S protein mediated cell entry.
2019	Chen, Yi-Ning, et al. "Entry of Scotophilus Bat Coronavirus-512 and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus in Human and Multiple Animal Cells." <i>Pathogens</i> 8.4 (2019): 259.	Demonstrated the ability of S protein in a specific bat CoV to enter a variety of host cells.
2018	Xie, Jiazheng, et al. "Dampened STING-dependent interferon activation in bats." <i>Cell host & microbe</i> 23.3 (2018): 297-301.	Examined molecular mechanisms that enable bats "to serve as a virus reservoir".
2018	Luo, Yun, et al. "Longitudinal surveillance of betacoronaviruses in fruit bats in Yunnan Province, China during 2009–2016." <i>Virologica Sinica</i> 33.1 (2018): 87-95.	Long-term surveillance and sequencing of beta CoVs in bats in Yunnan.
2018	Liu, Hui, et al. "miR-146a-5p promotes replication of infectious bronchitis virus by targeting IRAK2 and TNFRSF18." <i>Microbial pathogenesis</i> 120 (2018): 32-36.	Found high levels of certain miRNAs enhance replication of avian infectious bronchitis virus CoV.
2017	Hu, Ben, et al. "Discovery of a rich gene pool of bat SARS-related coronaviruses provides new insights into the origin of SARS coronavirus." <i>PLoS pathogens</i> 13.11 (2017).	5-year surveillance of SARSr-CoV in bats from Yunnan Province discovers 11 new SARSr-CoV strains and sequences.
2017	Ge, Xing-Yi, et al. "Detection of alpha-and betacoronaviruses in rodents from Yunnan, China." <i>Virology journal</i> 14.1 (2017): 98.	Sampled and sequenced alpha and beta CoVs from rodents in Yunnan.
2017	Zhou, Jie, et al. "Human intestinal tract serves as an alternative infection route for Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus." <i>Science advances</i> 3.11 (2017): eaao4966.	Determined the intestinal tract in humans as a possible route of infection for MERS.
2017	Liang, Jie, et al. "Detection of diverse viruses in alimentary specimens of bats in Macau." <i>Virologica Sinica</i> 32.3 (2017): 226-234.	Surveillance of viruses in Macau including CoV and adenovirus.
2016	Yang, Xing-Lou, et al. "Isolation and characterization of a novel bat coronavirus closely related to the direct progenitor	Reports isolation and characterization of a

	of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus." Journal of virology 90.6 (2016): 3253-3256.	novel bat CoV similar to SARS-CoV, sharing the cell entry mechanism.
2016	Zeng, Lei-Ping, et al. "Bat severe acute respiratory syndrome-like coronavirus WIV1 encodes an extra accessory protein, ORFX, involved in modulation of the host immune response." Journal of virology 90.14 (2016): 6573-6582.	Studied mutants of a SARS-like CoV to demonstrate importance of certain genes in modulation of host immune response.
2016	Menachery, Vineet D., et al. "Corrigendum: A SARS-like cluster of circulating bat coronaviruses shows potential for human emergence." Nature medicine 22.4 (2016): 446.	Generated and characterized a chimeric virus expressing S protein from a bat CoV in a mouse-adapted CoV; demonstrated robust viral replication in vitro and in vivo.
2016	Jin, Dong-Yan, B. J. Zheng, and Yick-Pang Ching. "Gene regulatory function and cellular partners of SARS-associated coronavirus nucleocapsid protein." Hong Kong Med J 22.6 Supplement 7 (2016).	SARS-CoV N protein did not modulate expression of a gene that causes vascular thrombosis and fibrin deposition.
2016	Xu, Peng-wei, et al. "Assembly and immunogenicity of baculovirus-derived infectious bronchitis virus-like particles carrying membrane, envelope and the recombinant spike proteins." Biotechnology letters 38.2 (2016): 299-304.	Assembled infectious bronchitis virus-like particles with recombinant spike protein.
2016	Ge, Xing-Yi, et al. "Coexistence of multiple coronaviruses in several bat colonies in an abandoned mineshaft." Virologica Sinica 31.1 (2016): 31-40.	Sequenced several alpha and beta CoVs from bats in Yunnan; found new strain of SARS-like CoV and a new beta CoV.

From: (b)(6)@state.gov>
To: (b)(6)@state.gov>
(b)(6)@state.gov>;
CC: Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: USG and COVID research (worth reading)—recommend proceed undeterred on article V
Date: Sun, 25 Oct 2020 01:51:51 +0000

Please read (b)(5)

(b)(5)

(b)(6)

<https://www.newsweek.com/dr-fauci-backed-controversial-wuhan-lab-millions-us-dollars-risky-coronavirus-research-1500741>

Dr. Fauci Backed Controversial Wuhan Lab with U.S. Dollars for Risky Coronavirus Research

By Fred Guterl On 4/28/20 at 2:57 PM EDT



Fauci: 'The Worst Is Yet Ahead For Us' Amid The Coronavirus Outbreak

Biomedical research ultimately protects public health, said Dr. Anthony Fauci, in explaining his support for controversial research. Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

Dr. Anthony Fauci is an adviser to President Donald Trump and something of an American folk hero for his steady, calm leadership during the pandemic crisis. At least one poll shows that Americans trust Fauci more than Trump on the coronavirus pandemic—and few scientists are portrayed on TV by Brad Pitt.

But just last year, the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases, the organization led by Dr. Fauci, funded scientists at the Wuhan Institute of Virology and other institutions for work on gain-of-function research on bat coronaviruses.

In 2019, with the backing of NIAID, the National Institutes of Health committed \$3.7 million over six years for research that included some gain-of-function work. The program followed another \$3.7 million, 5-year project for collecting and studying bat coronaviruses, which ended in 2019, bringing the total to \$7.4 million.

Many scientists have criticized gain of function research, which involves manipulating viruses in the lab to explore their potential for infecting humans, because it creates a risk of starting a pandemic from accidental release.

SARS-CoV-2 , the virus now causing a global pandemic, is believed to have originated in bats. U.S. intelligence, after originally asserting that the coronavirus had occurred naturally, conceded last month that the pandemic may have originated in a leak from the Wuhan lab. (At this point most scientists say it's possible—but not likely—that the pandemic virus was engineered or manipulated.)

Dr. Fauci did not respond to *Newsweek's* requests for comment. NIH responded with a statement that said in part: "Most emerging human viruses come from wildlife, and these represent a significant threat to public health and biosecurity in the US and globally, as demonstrated by the SARS epidemic of 2002-03, and the current COVID-19 pandemic.... scientific research indicates that there is no evidence that suggests the virus was created in a laboratory."

The NIH research consisted of two parts. The first part began in 2014 and involved surveillance of bat coronaviruses, and had a budget of \$3.7 million. The program funded Shi Zheng-Li, a virologist at the Wuhan lab, and other researchers to investigate and catalogue bat coronaviruses in the wild. This part of the project was completed in 2019.

A second phase of the project, beginning that year, included additional surveillance work but also gain-of-function research for the purpose of understanding how bat coronaviruses could mutate to attack humans. The project was run by EcoHealth Alliance, a non-profit research group, under the direction of President Peter Daszak, an expert on disease ecology. NIH canceled the project just this past Friday, April 24th, *Politico* reported. Daszak did not immediately respond to *Newsweek* requests for comment.

The project proposal states: "We will use S protein sequence data, infectious clone technology, in vitro and in vivo infection experiments and analysis of receptor binding to test the hypothesis that % divergence thresholds in S protein sequences predict spillover potential."

In layman's terms, "spillover potential" refers to the ability of a virus to jump from animals to humans, which requires that the virus be able to attach to receptors in the cells of humans. SARS-CoV-2, for instance, is adept at binding to the ACE2 receptor in human lungs and other organs.

According to Richard Ebright, an infectious disease expert at Rutgers University, the project description refers to experiments that would enhance the ability of bat coronavirus to infect human cells and laboratory animals using techniques of genetic engineering. In the wake of the pandemic, that is a noteworthy detail.

Ebright, along with many other scientists, has been a vocal opponent of gain-of-function research because of the risk it presents of creating a pandemic through accidental release from a lab.

Dr. Fauci is renowned for his work on the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1990s. Born in Brooklyn, he graduated first in his class from Cornell University Medical College in 1966. As head of NIAID since 1984, he has served as an adviser to every U.S. president since Ronald Reagan.

A decade ago, during a controversy over gain-of-function research on bird-flu viruses, Dr. Fauci played an important role in promoting the work. He argued that the research was worth the risk it entailed because it enables scientists to make preparations, such as investigating possible anti-viral medications, that could be useful if and when a pandemic occurred.

The work in question was a type of gain-of-function research that involved taking wild viruses and passing them through live animals until they mutate into a form that could pose a pandemic threat. Scientists used it to take a virus that was poorly transmitted among humans and make it into one that was highly transmissible—a hallmark of a pandemic virus. This work was done by infecting a series of ferrets, allowing the virus to mutate until a ferret that hadn't been deliberately infected contracted the disease.

The work entailed risks that worried even seasoned researchers. More than 200 scientists called for the work to be halted. The problem, they said, is that it increased the likelihood that a pandemic would occur through a laboratory accident.

China Suggests U.S. Is 'Hiding Something' About Its Coronavirus Response
[Read more](#)

Dr. Fauci defended the work. "[D]etermining the molecular Achilles' heel of these viruses can allow scientists to identify novel antiviral drug targets that could be used to prevent infection in those at risk or to better treat those who become infected," wrote Fauci and two co-authors in the *Washington Post* on December 30, 2011. "Decades of experience tells us that disseminating information gained through biomedical research to legitimate scientists and health officials provides a critical foundation for generating appropriate countermeasures and, ultimately, protecting the public health."

Nevertheless, in 2014, under pressure from the Obama administration, the National Institutes of Health instituted a moratorium on the work, suspending 21 studies.

Three years later, though—in December 2017—the NIH ended the moratorium and the second phase of the NIAID project, which included the gain-of-function research, began. The NIH established a framework for determining how the research would go forward: scientists have to get approval from a panel of experts, who would decide whether the risks were justified.

The reviews were indeed conducted—but in secret, for which the NIH has drawn criticism. In early 2019, after a reporter for *Science* magazine discovered that the NIH had approved two influenza research projects that used gain of function methods, scientists who oppose this kind of research excoriated the NIH in an editorial in the *Washington Post*.

"We have serious doubts about whether these experiments should be conducted at all," wrote Tom Inglesby of Johns Hopkins University and Marc Lipsitch of Harvard. "[W]ith deliberations kept behind closed doors, none of us will have the opportunity to understand how the government arrived at these decisions or to judge the rigor and integrity of that process."

Correction 5/5, 6:20 p.m.: *The headline of this story has been corrected to reflect that the Wuhan lab received only a part of the millions of U.S. dollars allocated for virus research.*

<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2015/11/151110115711.htm>

Science News

from research organizations

New SARS-like virus can jump directly from bats to humans, no treatment available

Findings provide an opportunity to develop drugs and vaccines for coronaviruses before they emerges from animals to cause a human epidemic

Date:

November 10, 2015

Source:

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Summary:

A new bat SARS-like virus has been discovered that can jump directly from its bat hosts to humans without mutation. However, researchers point out that if the SARS-like virus did jump, it is still unclear whether it could spread from human to human.

Researchers from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill have discovered a new bat SARS-like virus that can jump directly from its bat hosts to humans without mutation. However, researchers point out that if the SARS-like virus did jump, it is still unclear whether it could spread from human to human.

The discovery, reported in the Nov. 9 issue of *Nature Medicine*, is notable not only because there is no treatment for this newly discovered virus, but also because it highlights an ongoing debate over the government's decision to suspend all gain of function experiments on a variety of select agents earlier this year. The move has put a substantial standstill on the development of vaccines or treatments for these pathogens should there be an outbreak.

"Studies have predicted the existence of nearly 5,000 coronaviruses in bat populations and some of these have the potential to emerge as human pathogens," said senior author Ralph Baric, a faculty member at the Gillings School of Global Public Health and expert in coronaviruses. "So this is not a situation of 'if' there will be an outbreak of one of these coronaviruses but rather when and how prepared we'll be to address it."

SARS first jumped from animals to humans in 2002-2003 and caused a worldwide outbreak, resulting in 8,000 cases, including one case in Chapel Hill. With nearly 800 deaths during that outbreak, SARS-CoV presents much like flu symptoms but then can accelerate, compromise breathing and bring on a deadly form of pneumonia. The outbreak was controlled through public health interventions and the original virus was thought to have been extinct since 2004.

Baric and his team demonstrated that the newly-identified SARS-like virus, labeled SHC014-CoV and found in the Chinese horseshoe bats, can jump between bats and humans by showing that the virus can latch onto and use the same human and bat receptor for entry. The virus also replicates as well as SARS-CoV in primary human lung cells, the preferred target for infection.

"This virus is highly pathogenic and treatments developed against the original SARS virus in 2002 and the ZMapp drugs used to fight Ebola fail to neutralize and control this particular virus," said Baric. "So building resources, rather than limiting them, to both examine animal populations for new threats and develop therapeutics is key for limiting future outbreaks."

Story Source:

Materials provided by **University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill**. Note: Content may be edited for style and length.

Journal Reference:

1. Vineet D Menachery, Boyd L Yount, Kari Debbink, Sudhakar Agnihothram, Lisa E Gralinski, Jessica A Plante, Rachel L Graham, Trevor Scobey, Xing-Yi Ge, Eric F Donaldson, Scott H Randell, Antonio Lanzavecchia, Wayne A Marasco, Zhengli-Li Shi, Ralph S Baric. **A SARS-like cluster of circulating bat coronaviruses shows potential for human emergence.** *Nature Medicine*, 2015; DOI: [10.1038/nm.3985](https://doi.org/10.1038/nm.3985)

Cite This Page: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "New SARS-like virus can jump directly from bats to humans, no treatment available: Findings provide an opportunity to develop drugs and vaccines for coronaviruses before they emerges from animals to cause a human epidemic." ScienceDaily. ScienceDaily, 10 November 2015. <www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2015/11/151110115711.htm>.

<https://www.the-scientist.com/news-opinion/lab-made-coronavirus-triggers-debate-34502>

Lab-Made Coronavirus Triggers Debate

The creation of a chimeric SARS-like virus has scientists discussing the risks of gain-of-function research.



Jef Akst

Nov 16, 2015

Update (March 11, 2020): On social media and news outlets, a theory has circulated that the coronavirus at the root of the COVID-19 outbreak originated in a research lab. Scientists say there is no evidence that the SARS-CoV-2 virus escaped from a lab.

MERS coronavirus
[flickr](#), [niaid](#)

Ralph Baric, an infectious-disease researcher at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, last week (November 9) published a study on his team's efforts to engineer a virus with the surface protein of the SHC014 coronavirus, found in horseshoe bats in China, and the backbone of one that causes human-like severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in mice. The hybrid virus could infect human airway cells and caused disease in mice, according to the team's results, which were published in *Nature Medicine*.

The results demonstrate the ability of the SHC014 surface protein to bind and infect human cells, validating concerns that this virus—or other coronaviruses found in bat species—may be capable of making the leap to people without first evolving in an intermediate host, *Nature* reported. They also reignite a debate about whether that information justifies the risk of such work, known as gain-of-function research. "If the [new] virus escaped, nobody could predict the trajectory," Simon Wain-Hobson, a virologist at the Pasteur Institute in Paris, told *Nature*.

In October 2013, the US government put a stop to all federal funding for gain-of-function studies, with particular concern rising about influenza, SARS, and Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS). "NIH [National Institutes of Health] has funded such studies because they

help define the fundamental nature of human-pathogen interactions, enable the assessment of the pandemic potential of emerging infectious agents, and inform public health and preparedness efforts," NIH Director Francis Collins said in a statement at the time. "These studies, however, also entail biosafety and biosecurity risks, which need to be understood better."

Baric's study on the SHC014-chimeric coronavirus began before the moratorium was announced, and the NIH allowed it to proceed during a review process, which eventually led to the conclusion that the work did not fall under the new restrictions, Baric told *Nature*. But some researchers, like Wain-Hobson, disagree with that decision.

The debate comes down to how informative the results are. "The only impact of this work is the creation, in a lab, of a new, non-natural risk," Richard Ebright, a molecular biologist and biodefence expert at Rutgers University, told *Nature*.

But Baric and others argued the study's importance. "[The results] move this virus from a candidate emerging pathogen to a clear and present danger," Peter Daszak, president of the EcoHealth Alliance, which samples viruses from animals and people in emerging-diseases hotspots across the globe, told *Nature*.

<https://www.propublica.org/article/here-are-six-accidents-unc-researchers-had-with-lab-created-coronaviruses>

Here Are Six Accidents UNC Researchers Had With Lab-Created Coronaviruses

There have been mouse bites and spills and other mishaps during experiments involving genetically altered coronaviruses at a high-security lab at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

by Alison Young and Jessica Blake for [ProPublica](#)

Aug. 17, 1:55 p.m. EDT

Six accidents with lab-created coronaviruses occurred at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's biosafety level 3 labs between Jan. 1, 2015 and June 1, 2020. (Christopher Janaro)

Series: Coronavirus

The U.S. Response to COVID-19

ProPublica is a nonprofit newsroom that investigates abuses of power. Sign up to receive [our biggest stories](#) as soon as they're published.

From Jan. 1, 2015, through June 1, 2020, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill reported 28 lab incidents involving genetically engineered organisms to safety officials at the National Institutes of Health, according to documents UNC released to ProPublica under a public records request. The NIH oversees research involving genetically modified organisms.

Six of the incidents involved various types of lab-created coronaviruses. Many were engineered to allow the study of the virus in mice. UNC declined to answer questions about the incidents and to disclose key details about them to the public, including the names of viruses involved, the nature of the modifications made to them and what risks were posed to the public, contrary to NIH guidelines.

UNC said in a statement that it "notified the proper oversight agencies about the incidents and took corrective action as needed."

Reports indicate UNC researchers were potentially exposed to lab-created coronaviruses in several incidents since 2015. These incidents highlight the risks even in the most secure and respected research facilities.

August 2015: Two researchers required medical monitoring after a mouse briefly escaped inside one of UNC's biosafety level 3 labs. The mouse, which had been infected with an undisclosed type of "mouse adapted" virus, squirmed free of a researcher's gloved hand and onto the lab

floor. It was caught inside the lab and returned to its cage. UNC officials refused to disclose the name of the virus, but NIH officials told ProPublica it was a type of “SARS-associated Coronavirus.” Incident reports say the mouse was no longer believed to be infectious and the researchers were wearing protective gear including powered respirators. Still, the incident was deemed a potential exposure and the workers were required to report their temperatures and any symptoms twice daily for 10 days. Neither was sickened.

October 2015: Three UNC researchers were potentially exposed to an undisclosed “mouse adapted” virus when a shallow container fell to the floor of a biosafety level 3 lab, spilled and potentially created aerosolized droplets. NIH officials told ProPublica the incident involved a type of SARS-associated coronavirus. Even though the three researchers in the lab at the time were wearing safety gear and powered air-purifying respirators, university safety officials deemed it a “potential exposure.” The workers were placed on medical surveillance for 10 days. None were sickened.

November 2015: Two UNC lab workers were potentially exposed to a lab-created type of MERS coronavirus when an empty cage with contaminated animal bedding spilled on the floor of a biosafety level 3 lab. A researcher was in the process of transferring MERS-infected mice to a clean cage when the dirty cage was knocked over. The two workers in the UNC lab at the time of the incident left and allowed the aerosolized particles from the incident to settle to the ground before returning to decontaminate the area. Even though the two workers were wearing head-to-toe protective gear and powered respirators, the incident was deemed a potential exposure. They were placed on medical surveillance for 10 days and required to report temperatures and any symptoms twice daily. Neither was sickened.

February 2016: A mouse infected with an undisclosed “mouse adapted” virus bit a researcher’s finger through two layers of gloves as she tried to weigh it in a biosafety level 3 lab. NIH officials told ProPublica that the incident involved a type of SARS-associated coronavirus. Following lab procedures, the researcher disinfected her gloves and allowed the wound to bleed for a minute before washing her hands with soap and water for five minutes. She was evaluated at UNC’s employee occupational health clinic where the medical director discussed options for isolating the researcher. Instead, “the researcher was required to wear a surgical mask while in public and at work” and to report her temperature and any symptoms twice daily. The reports note the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention was also alerted because the virus involved in the incident is on a list of dangerous pathogens that are federally regulated. The report says “updates were provided to the CDC throughout the medical monitoring period.” The researcher was not sickened.

April 2017: A plate containing virus from lung samples from a mouse infected with an undisclosed type of virus was dropped by a researcher in a biosafety level 3 lab, spilling a small amount of virus material onto an incubator door and the floor. While UNC wouldn’t disclose the virus’s name, NIH told ProPublica that it was a type of SARS-associated coronavirus. In this incident, the university’s employee occupational health clinic said it would not be necessary for the three researchers who were in the lab to report their temperatures to the clinic because the spill was small and the researchers’ safety gear was intact. The workers were advised to do their

usual daily self-monitoring for any respiratory symptoms or temperature. No further information about the workers' health was included in the incident reports.

April 2020: A UNC scientist underwent 14 days of self-quarantine at home after a mouse bite caused potential exposure to a strain of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, that had been adapted for growth in mice. The incident in a biosafety level 3 lab happened when a researcher attempted to read the ID number on a tag on a mouse's ear. The mouse flipped over in the researcher's hand and bit an index finger through two layers of gloves. It did not appear to break the researcher's skin, but UNC told NIH in its reports that "given the uncertainty surrounding the exposure, we are treating this as a medium/high risk exposure." The researcher was instructed to self-quarantine and do twice-daily temperature checks. UNC also notified the local Health Department. No further information about the worker's health was included in the incident reports.

<https://www.propublica.org/article/near-misses-at-unc-chapel-hills-high-security-lab-illustrate-risk-of-accidents-with-coronaviruses>

Coronavirus

Near Misses at UNC Chapel Hill's High-Security Lab Illustrate Risk of Accidents With Coronaviruses

Reports indicate UNC researchers were potentially exposed to lab-created coronaviruses in several incidents since 2015. These incidents highlight the risks even in the most secure and respected research facilities.

by Alison Young and Jessica Blake for ProPublica

Aug. 17, 1:56 p.m. EDT

Researchers suit up in a high-security lab at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Gillings School of Global Public Health. Records show several incidents at UNC's labs with genetically modified coronaviruses since 2015. (Christopher Janaro)

Series: Coronavirus

The U.S. Response to COVID-19

ProPublica is a nonprofit newsroom that investigates abuses of power. Sign up to receive our biggest stories as soon as they're published.

The mouse infected with a lab-created type of SARS coronavirus was squirming upside down, dangling by its tail as a scientist carried it to a weighing container one day in February 2016. But the mundane task turned dangerous in seconds inside the North Carolina laboratory, which has drawn scrutiny for its partnership on similar research with China's Wuhan Institute of Virology.

In that moment, it wasn't enough that the experiment was taking place inside a biosafety level 3 lab, the second-highest security level, which was layered in high-tech equipment designed to keep dangerous pathogens from escaping. Or that the scientist was covered head-to-toe in gear to protect against infection: a full-body Tyvek suit, boot covers and double gloves, plus a powered air-purifying respirator.

As she carried the mouse, it climbed up its tail and bit her hard, breaking through the gloves and plunging its teeth — and potentially the virus — into her ring finger.

Then, instead of quarantining to wait for signs of infection, the scientist was allowed to go about her life in public for the next 10 days, wearing a surgical mask and reporting her temperature twice daily, newly obtained records show.

The scientist ultimately did not become ill, but the 2016 safety breach at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's high-containment laboratories is one of several near-miss incidents at the university in recent years involving multiple types of genetically engineered coronaviruses, the records show.

While no one is suggesting that UNC created the virus that causes COVID-19, alone or with the Wuhan lab, such near misses highlight the potential risks of an infected lab worker exposing the public even in the most secure and respected research facilities as they search for treatments and vaccines.

The university has declined to publicly disclose key details about the incidents, including the names of viruses involved, the nature of the modifications made to them and what risks were posed to the public, contrary to National Institutes of Health guidelines.

"The University notified the proper oversight agencies about the incidents and took corrective action as needed," UNC said in a statement, noting that its research has contributed to promising treatments for COVID-19. "It is absolutely critical to understand what viruses exist in nature and how they could affect human health."

The nature of the safety breaches at UNC are particularly important now as the origins of COVID-19, which has killed more than 775,000 people worldwide and infected 21.7 million others, continue to elude public health officials and other investigators.

There have been mouse bites and spills and other mishaps during experiments involving genetically altered coronaviruses at a high-security lab at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

President Donald Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo have publicly speculated, without offering proof, that a lab in Wuhan, the Chinese city where COVID-19 cases first appeared, may be responsible for the current coronavirus pandemic. While that theory is dismissed by many as political blame-shifting and anti-China rhetoric, credible scientists have been concerned for years about the potential for a lab accident to cause a pandemic.

Richard Ebright, a molecular biologist at Rutgers University who has testified before Congress on lab safety issues, said the series of incidents with coronaviruses at UNC gives fuel to the possibility that this pandemic, or one in the future, could originate as a lab accident.

Since 2007, the U.S. Government Accountability Office, the investigative arm of Congress, has repeatedly warned that the proliferation of high-containment biosafety level 3 and level 4 labs in the United States and around the world is increasing the risk of dangerous viruses, bacteria or toxins being intentionally or unintentionally released from the facilities. Over the years, Congress has held multiple hearings examining numerous serious incidents in elite U.S. labs, including mishaps with anthrax, deadly smallpox and Ebola viruses and dangerous strains of avian influenza.

In April, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence issued a public statement that while the U.S. intelligence community agrees with widespread scientific consensus that the COVID-19 virus was not human-made or genetically modified, federal spy agencies and security organizations have not ruled out a lab accident as the source of the outbreak.

"The IC will continue to rigorously examine emerging information and intelligence to determine whether the outbreak began through contact with infected animals or if it was the result of an accident at a laboratory in Wuhan," the statement said.

Questions about a potential lab accident have focused on two large infectious disease labs in Wuhan: The Wuhan Institute of Virology and the Wuhan Center for Disease Control and Prevention. The Chinese government has said the labs had nothing to do with the pandemic.

"It is unfortunate that we have been targeted as a scapegoat for the origin of the virus," Wang Yanyi, director of the Wuhan Institute of Virology said in an interview this month with NBC News.

The Wuhan Institute of Virology is China's first research facility to operate biosafety level 4 labs, the highest safety level, which are built with special design features and equipment to prevent the most dangerous pathogens from getting out. The institute has specialized in the study of bat coronaviruses, research led by virologist Shi Zhengli, who has been nicknamed the "Bat Woman" for her team's pursuit of specimens of wild SARS-like viruses in bat caves.

In July, Shi fired back at White House speculation about the institute, telling Science magazine that the institute had never had contact with or studied the virus that causes COVID-19 until Dec. 30, 2019, when it first received samples from patients who were sickened with an unknown type of pneumonia. "U.S. President Trump's claim that SARS-CoV-2 was leaked from our institute totally contradicts the facts," she told Science.

Researchers like Shi and the team of scientists at UNC are attempting to determine which of the many coronaviruses that currently only infect animals have the potential to mutate in ways that would allow them to jump to humans, allowing for advance development of treatments and vaccines.

The February 2016 safety breach at the UNC's high-containment laboratories drew scrutiny at the time from concerned federal health officials, records show. In its aftermath, UNC officials provided repeated updates to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, though neither the university nor the CDC will say what they were about. The university deleted the virus name from incident reports it released in response to a public records request. Federal lab safety officials at the NIH confirmed in an emailed response to questions from ProPublica that the 2016 incident, as well as several others where UNC redacted the pathogen name from reports, involved types of "SARS-associated Coronavirus." But the NIH, which oversees experiments involving genetically modified viruses and bacteria, did not provide any further details about the nature or genetic composition of the lab-created viruses.

NIH, CDC and UNC officials declined to explain the potential risks to the public of the 2016 incident or why the researcher wasn't quarantined until it was known she wasn't infected. NIH said it is each research institution's responsibility to assess the risks of an incident and respond to it appropriately.

After the researcher was bitten by the infected mouse, university officials initially discussed "options for isolation" of the scientist during the incubation period for the lab-created virus, the incident reports show. Instead, they allowed her to remain in public, only requiring that she wear a surgical mask and report her temperature twice daily.

While the researcher did not get sick, the case underscores the concerns that have been raised about the potential for a lab accident to unleash a dangerous virus — natural or human-made — into the surrounding community and beyond. It also illustrates how potentially infected lab workers could be allowed to move about in a city and the efforts that labs make to keep details of such safety breaches secret.

Records show that during the five years before the pandemic began, at least six UNC researchers were required to undergo medical monitoring following four incidents where they were potentially exposed to what the NIH now confirms were types of lab-created SARS coronaviruses. In addition, two other UNC researchers had to undergo medical surveillance because of their potential exposure to a type of lab-created MERS coronavirus. The monitoring involved reporting temperatures or any symptoms to university medical officials twice daily.

In each case, the reports indicate these workers were allowed to go about their lives while waiting for symptoms to appear. As the world has learned in recent months, it's possible for people without symptoms to be infected with the coronavirus and unknowingly spread disease to others.

Safety incidents at UNC have continued in the wake of the pandemic as the university's researchers have joined scientists worldwide studying the new SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes COVID-19.

On April 21, a UNC researcher wearing full-body protective gear was bitten on their index finger while weighing a mouse infected with a genetically altered form of the SARS-CoV-2 virus adapted to grow in mice. In contrast to the 2016 mouse mishap, the researcher bitten this spring was told to self-quarantine at home for 14 days, records show. The local Health Department was also notified about the incident.

UNC officials declined to be interviewed and did not answer questions about the incidents sent to them in writing.

Research at UNC's biosafety level 3 labs has come under scrutiny in the past because of controversial coronavirus experiments its scientists have done with partners at the Wuhan Institute of Virology.

In November 2015, UNC scientists published a research paper detailing how they had created a lab-made hybrid coronavirus with the potential to infect people. Their experiments involved inserting part of a coronavirus called SHC014-CoV found in Chinese horseshoe bats into a SARS virus to see if the lab-made hybrid virus — called a chimera — could efficiently infect human cells.

It could. And it prompted the research team — which included scientists at the Wuhan Institute of Virology — to warn in their paper of the risks that the SHC014 coronavirus and others circulating in bat populations have to potentially emerge as a threat to humans. At UNC, a senior author of the paper was Ralph Baric, an epidemiology professor and international expert on coronaviruses. UNC said Baric was unavailable for an interview, but it noted the virus in the experiment was “a very different strain” than the one that causes COVID-19.

The potential risks posed by creating a virus not found in nature prompted criticism at the time from some scientists. The paper added to an ongoing international debate over risks and benefits of creating genetically modified pathogens that are potentially more dangerous than what’s found in nature, what’s known as “gain of function” research.

“If the virus escaped, nobody could predict the trajectory,” Simon Wain-Hobson, a virologist at the Pasteur Institute in Paris, told Nature at the time the UNC paper was published.

UNC officials would not say whether the 2016 mouse-bite incident, which occurred three months after the paper was published, involved a SARS chimera virus like the one in the 2015 paper.

Experts who reviewed the incident reports at ProPublica’s request said it is difficult to gauge the risks of UNC’s coronavirus incidents because the university removed key details about the nature of the viruses involved.

“There is no reason for the public not to be informed about the nature of biological agents involved in lab research and accidents,” said Gregory Koblenz, director of the biodefense graduate program at George Mason University, who noted that the research is not classified and will eventually be published in scientific journals.

“Making these reports public ensures accountability for the labs and funders and encourages them to learn from mistakes and reduce risk of them occurring,” Koblenz said.

UNC is required as a condition of its federal research funding to release to the public on demand certain safety records, including incident reports, about its work with genetically modified viruses. After ProPublica filed a complaint about UNC’s removal of the virus names, NIH said it contacted UNC “to remind them of their obligations.” But UNC still didn’t release the pathogen names and genetic modifications it removed from the records.

While UNC wouldn’t discuss the 2016 incident, in its statement to ProPublica the university emphasized that the research for the 2015 paper was approved by NIH, that it followed all safety protocols and that it was deemed a “low-risk” experiment because of the strain of coronavirus being studied.

"It is because of our early work that the United States was in a position to quickly find the first successful treatment for SARS-CoV-2," the university said in its statement. Research by UNC scientists has contributed to the development of a drug called EIDD-2801, which shows promise in preventing lung damage from COVID-19.

The source of the current pandemic remains unknown. Many scientific experts believe the virus that causes COVID-19 emerged in nature and is the result of people being exposed to bats or another type of animal that are natural carriers of it. Experts who have studied the virus's genetic sequence have said it doesn't appear to be genetically engineered.

Coronaviruses have jumped from animals to humans before. In 2002, the SARS coronavirus that causes severe acute respiratory syndrome emerged possibly from bats in southern China to set off an international epidemic that was extinguished in 2003 through public health measures. In 2012, the MERS coronavirus that causes Middle East respiratory syndrome was first identified in people sickened in Saudi Arabia and other countries in and near the Arabian Peninsula. It has been linked to exposure to camels.

But for the COVID-19 virus causing the current pandemic, more study is needed to know where and how the virus jumped from animals to humans.

"There have been extensive discussions about why the virus is almost certainly a naturally occurring strain, but the origin of the outbreak can only be determined — if it can ever be determined — by going through that more medical chain and examining those records," said Gigi Kwik Gronvall, a senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security.

While rare, outbreaks that spread from labs to people or animals in the surrounding environment have happened.

A lab accident or mishap with a vaccine trial are considered to be likely explanations for how a strain of flu that appeared to have been genetically frozen in time since the 1950s emerged and infected people around the world in 1977-78.

In 2004, a small outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome was traced by Chinese authorities and the World Health Organization to lab workers at the National Institute of Virology Laboratory of China's Center for Disease Control in Beijing, where experiments were conducted using live and inactivated SARS coronavirus. And in 2007, leaking drainage pipes at a vaccine research facility in England were blamed for an outbreak of foot and mouth disease among cattle.

For now, a team of experts from the World Health Organization is investigating the pandemic's origins, with a focus on understanding the animal hosts for COVID-19 and how the disease jumped between animals and humans.

"Identifying the origin of emerging viral disease has proven complex in past epidemics in different countries," the WHO said in a statement last month. "The process is an evolving endeavor which may lead to further international scientific research and collaboration globally."