

Scientists race to develop vaccine for new coronavirus



SINGAPORE: Scientists from the United States to Australia are using new technology in an ambitious, multi-million-dollar drive to develop a vaccine in record time to tackle China's coronavirus outbreak.

The new virus has spread rapidly since emerging late last year in China, killing more than 800 people in the mainland and infecting over 37,000. Cases have been reported in two dozen other countries.

Coming up with any vaccine typically takes years, and involves a lengthy process of testing on animals, clinical trials on humans and regulatory approvals.

But several teams of experts are racing to develop one quicker, backed by an international coalition that aims to combat emerging diseases, and Australian scientists hope theirs could be ready in six months.

"It is a high-pressure situation and there is a lot of weight on us," said senior researcher Keith Chappell, part of the group from Australia's University of Queensland.

But the scientist added he took "some solace" knowing several teams around the world were engaged in the same mission.

"The hope is that one of these will be successful and can contain this outbreak," he said.

The new coronavirus emerged at a market selling wild animals in the central Chinese city of Wuhan. The new coronavirus emerged at a market selling wild animals in the central Chinese city of Wuhan. But even a timeframe of six months looks agonisingly slow with the virus, believed to have emerged from a market selling wild animals, killing close to 100 people every day in mainland China.

Efforts are being led by the Coalition for Epi-

demio Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), a body established in 2017 to finance costly biotechnology research in the wake of an Ebola outbreak in West Africa that killed more than 11,000 people.

With a mission to speed up the development of vaccines, CEPI is pouring millions of dollars into four projects around the world and has put out a call for more proposals.

The projects hope to use new technology to develop vaccines that can be tested in the near future. The body's CEO, Richard Hatchett, said the aim was to start clinical testing in just 16 weeks.

German biopharmaceutical company CureVac and US-based Moderna Therapeutics are developing vaccines based on "messenger RNA" - instructions that tell the body to produce proteins - while Inovio, another American firm, is using DNA-based technology.

DNA- and RNA-based vaccines use the genetic coding of the virus to trick the body's cells into producing proteins identical to those on the surface of the pathogen, explained Ooi Eng Eong, deputy director of the emerging infectious diseases programme at the Duke-NUS Medical School in Singapore. The new coronavirus has killed more than 800 people and infected tens of thousands across China. The immune system learns to recognise the proteins so that it is ready to find and attack the virus when it enters the body. The Australian researchers are using "molecular clamp" technology invented by the university's scientists that allows them to rapidly develop new vaccines based solely on a virus DNA sequence.

French scientists at the Pasteur Institute are modifying the measles vaccine to work against the coronavirus, but do not expect it to be ready for about 20 months. —Reuters

Twitter says Facebook, Messenger accounts hacked

LONDON: Twitter confirmed on Friday that the official Twitter accounts of social media giant Facebook Inc and its Messenger platform were hacked. A Twitter spokesperson said in an emailed statement that the accounts were hacked through a third-party platform.

"As soon as we were made aware of the issue, we locked the compromised accounts and are working closely with our partners at Facebook to restore them," the Twitter spokesperson said. Separately, Facebook also confirmed that some of its official social media accounts were hacked on Friday.

"Some of our corporate social accounts were briefly hacked but we have secured and restored access," Facebook spokesman Joe Osborne said. The account of Twitter Inc Chief Executive Jack Dorsey was hacked in August, allowing an unauthorized person to send public tweets including racial slurs and curse words to his 4 million followers before Twitter secured the account. —AFP

Anti-Huawei UK lawmakers conducting 'witch-hunt'

LONDON: Senior members of Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservatives who have demanded Chinese telecoms giant Huawei must not have a role in Britain's 5G mobile network are conducting "a kind of witch-hunt", China's ambassador to London said. Last month the government said "high-risk vendors" such as Huawei would be allowed into the non-sensitive parts of the 5G network, although their involvement will be capped at 35 per cent.

Asked about a letter to Conservative lawmakers by several former ministers expressing concern over Huawei, Liu Xiaoming told the BBC: "They are totally wrong, I think what they are doing is a kind of a witch-hunt. Huawei is a private-owned company, nothing to do with the Chinese government and the only problem they have is they are a Chinese company." The Chinese government was pleased with Britain's decision, he added, although not "100 per cent satisfied" because the 35 per cent cap "does not show your principle of a free economy, free competition". —Reuters

Pence dismisses idea of US buying Nokia

WASHINGTON: US Vice President Mike Pence on Friday declined to endorse an unusual suggestion from US Attorney General William Barr that the United States consider taking control of two major foreign rivals of China-based Huawei Technologies Co Ltd. Barr, a former general counsel at Verizon Communications Inc, said on Thursday the United States and its allies should consider taking a "controlling stake" in Finland's Nokia and Sweden's Ericsson to counter Huawei's dominance in next-generation 5G wireless technology.

Pence suggested an alternative approach when asked by CNBC for his response. "Great respect to Attorney General Barr, but we believe the best way forward is what Ajit Pai announced just over the last several days," Pence said, referring to the Federal Communications Commission's chairman's efforts to free up more spectrum for 5G wireless use. "That's the plan the president has endorsed and will be carrying forward," Pence said, adding that the United States can expand 5G "by using the power of the free

Low-carbon future for Singapore isn't so far-fetched



SINGAPORE: The question of whether Singapore can or, more interestingly, should strive toward low-carbon energy transition has been raised recently in climate debates.

In an opinion piece by The Straits Times titled Can Singapore really transit to a post-oil economy?, economists Dr Tilak Doshi and Professor Euston Quah responded to a CNA commentary by Yale-NUS climate data scientist Angel Hsu and attempted to make a case against what they call "an over-hasty transition to newer but less efficient technologies".

The opinion piece made a strong statement: "Policies fashioned by green ideology will lead to Singapore collapsing economically first before it may drown in sea level rise".

However, we find the narrative of green ideology posing risk for Singapore's development rather unbalanced.

The authors argue that Singapore's legacy as a major petrochemical and refining hub must be central to climate policy discussions, which is indeed undeniable. Oil refining, petrochemicals and specialty chemicals production is one of the key pillars of Singapore's economy, contributing around 22 per cent of nominal gross domestic product in 2018.

Have Singaporeans been mollycoddled on climate change?

But a green economy does not preclude the petrochemical and refining industry altogether, and there are multiple scenarios of a low-carbon transition for Singapore.

For example, adopting technologies for carbon capture, storage and utilisation could cut carbon emissions of the petroleum refinery and chemical industries without significantly affecting economic output.

However, the technology's cost and energy efficiency have to be improved first,

which is why Singapore needs to focus on research and development in that area.

It is fair to argue that pace of energy transition is critical - rapid transition might bring devastating consequences. But there are solid reasons to suggest that achieving a greener economy deserves to be an end-goal for Singapore.

One of the criticisms that the green energy transition received in the opinion piece concerned its slow pace. But oil giant BP's 2019 Energy Outlook suggests that renewable energy's penetration into the global energy system is poised to be the quickest compared to any other fuel in history.

While oil and gas took around 40 to 50 years to rise from 1 per cent to 10 per cent in the global energy mix, renewables can take less than 25 years to achieve the same share. Further data from BP and the US Department of Energy indicate that renewable energy would comprise around a third of

global electricity generation by 2040. At the same time, in Southeast Asia, the share of renewables in electricity supply would be around 15 per cent in 2040.

Although that seems to be mild progress, a higher share of renewable electricity paves the way for deeper decarbonisation of Singapore. To really understand the island's low-carbon transition, we must take a closer look at the ongoing moves toward a greener economy and the opportunities these afford.

At the recent Institute of Policy Studies Perspectives 2020 conference, Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing said that Singapore is looking at a post-fossil fuel future given the global trends in decarbonisation.

He said however, that this was dependent on how fast Singapore is able to adopt the necessary technologies and address the shift in economic structure that decarboni-

US, Europe could team up on 5G, but not if trade war underway



The United States and the European Union could team up to counter the dominance of China's Huawei Technologies in next-generation 5G telecoms technology, but not if Washington continues to threaten tariffs against Brussels, a senior German conservative lawmaker said late on Friday.

Norbert Roettgen, a member of German Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democrats, said he told US officials during a visit to Washington that he saw opportunities for greater transatlantic cooperation on 5G that would benefit both sides.

"But it must be clear that cannot happen if there is simultaneously the threat of trade war on the table," said Roettgen, who heads the foreign affairs committee of Germany's lower house of parliament, speaking after meetings with State Department and White House officials.

After reaching a Phase 1 trade deal with China, and securing the passage of a new North American trade pact in Congress, US President Donald Trump has set his sights on Europe and what he views as its unfair barriers for US companies.

Trump has threatened to slap 25% tariffs on European car imports, a move Brussels says it would counter with tariffs of its own. The two blocs are also at odds over digital services taxes, aircraft subsidies, and Huawei.

The United States says gear provided by Huawei, the

leading telecoms equipment vendor with a global market share of 28%, contains "back doors" that would enable China to spy on other countries, a claim Huawei vigorously denies.

Roettgen told reporters he did not expect Trump to follow through on the car tariff threat until after the November presidential election, but said the situation was unpredictable.

He said Trump's rhetoric had become increasingly polarizing, but the historic allies shared security concerns about China and could work together to expand Europe's alternatives to Huawei's dominance of the 5G market.

US Attorney General William Barr on Thursday suggested the United States consider taking a "controlling stake" in two major foreign rivals of Huawei, Finland's Nokia and Sweden's Ericsson, but the White House dismissed that proposal on Friday.

The EU last week said members should decide for themselves what part Huawei can play in their 5G networks, resisting pressure from Washington for an outright ban. Merkel favors strict security requirements for Germany's 5G network, but opposes excluding individual companies.

Roettgen sees growing support for taking a tougher line by requiring firms that roll out a 5G network to be free of political influence in their home country, a move clearly aimed at Huawei.