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With an overcast sky as a backdrop, an appropriately masked vendor displays the magic of soap bubbles at the Galle Face promenade in Colombo on Sunday (28), as families venture out for some weekend fun and frolic. - J. Subesekum/ENCL

Omicron COVID variant Public warned to get vaccines, be cautious, as travellers from 6 African nations banned

COLOMBO - Health officials urged the public to get vaccinated as soon as possible, including the booster dose at the correct time, as Omicron, the highly mutated variant of COVID-19, caused concern across the world, leading to many countries, including Sri Lanka, imposing travel bans from six African nations. "As the new variant was discovered, Sri Lanka, like any other country, took preventive measures by banning flights from the countries that show the spread of the new variant," said Dr. Chandima Jeevawardana, Director, Molecular and Cell Biology Unit of the University of Sri Jayawardenepura, of the travel ban slated to come into effect from Monday (29). A statement from the Department of Government Information said on Saturday travellers from South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Lesotho and Eswatini, will not be allowed to enter Sri Lanka from Monday, and travellers who had already

arrived from the six countries over the past two days will have to undergo mandatory 14 days quarantine. The World Health Organization (WHO) on Friday (26) declared the new coronavirus variant to be "of concern". It was first reported to the WHO from South Africa on Wednesday (24) and has since been identified in Botswana, Belgium, Hong Kong, Israel, the Netherlands, Germany and Australia. Cautioning that no country has been successful in preventing the variants coming in, Dr. Jeevawardana warned there was a likelihood of the Omicron variant being identified in Sri Lanka in the future. He said the with the travel ban, the aim is to slow down that likelihood as much as possible. Reports said preliminary evidence suggests an increased risk of reinfection with the Omicron variant, compared to other variants of concern, with a number of

cases detected in almost all the provinces in South Africa. Dr. Jeevawardana said Omicron is the fifth variant of concern, but that it was of concern to the scientific community because of its high (about 30) S-gene mutations. "Of those 30 mutations, around 10 may affect the transmission. Therefore, scientists predict it may spread faster than the Delta variant," he warned, but said scientists were still investigating the biology of the variant. Dr. Jeevawardana said as a preventive measure the Molecular and Cell Biology Unit is planning to increase the gene sequencing test numbers to detect any new variants coming to Sri Lanka. Dr. Jeevawardana advised the public to stick to the basic guidelines and to get the vaccine as well as the booster shots as soon as possible, explaining, "The booster will boost the antibodies in the body." -EN/ENCL

UNP condemns 'threats levelled by President'

COLOMBO - The United National Party (UNP) on Sunday (28) condemned the allegations levelled by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa with regards the Easter Sunday attacks, and accused him of suggesting persons not responsible for the attacks, be deprived of their Civic Rights by legislation. President Rajapaksa, at the recent opening of the New Kelani Bridge claimed the former prime minister and the entire cabinet of ministers should be held responsible for the Easter Sunday attack that killed over 260 and injured more than 500. In a statement issued on Sunday, the party pointed out that neither the Presidential Commission of Inquiry report nor the Select Committee of Parliament report have stated that the former Prime Minister nor any former Minister of the Cabinet was responsible for the attacks. "What the President is suggesting is that persons not responsible for the Easter Sunday Attacks, and against whom there are no judicial decisions to that effect, be deprived of their Civic Rights by legislation," the statement said, pointing out it was contrary to the fundamental principles of Democracy and bring into conflict the judicial and legislative process. "Therefore, this also violates article 3 and 4 of the Constitution of Sri Lanka," it said, adding that it was also a violation of the President's oath to uphold the Constitution. The statement claimed, it was not surprising that Sri Lanka, under this current government, has not been invited for the virtual summit on Democracy hosted by the United States of America. -ENCL

Journalist attacked with barbed wire in Mullaitivu

COLOMBO - A Mullaitivu journalist, alleged to have been attacked by four military personnel for taking pictures of a Mullivaikkal road sign has been admitted to the Mullaitivu hospital with serious injuries. Reports said journalist Vishvalingham Vishvachandran had been attacked with a contraption made of barbed wire. "I did not interfere with them (security forces) from carrying out their jobs," the injured journalist was quoted as saying in the local media. "I just came to take a picture of the Mullivaikkal road sign." He has said he was not given an opportunity to talk or explain his reason for being at the site, but was chased away by army officers from about a distance of 100 metres. Vishvachandran has said he was videoing his exit as he edged back slowly, and that security forces personnel stopped him when he was about 75 metres away and attempted to confiscate his recording equipment. He has alleged that security personnel dragged the barbed wired device across his body, leaving cuts and grazes along the way. Vishvachandran has identified a man dressed in military uniform as one of the attackers, and claimed another soldier had filmed the incident. Reports said a palmira stick wrapped in barbed wire was found at the scene - the weapon that was allegedly used to assault him. -TG/ENCL

Kinniya ferry tragedy claims another victim; death toll increases 7

COLOMBO - A six-year-old girl who was in intensive care following Tuesday's (23) fatal Kinniya ferry accident, succumbed to her injuries Sunday (28) morning, taking the death toll to seven. The police confirmed the 6-year-old girl, who was being treated at the intensive care unit of the Trincomalee general hospital, succumbed to her injuries early Sunday. Six people including four children were killed when the ferry transporting residents and school children across the Kinniya lagoon by the Kurinjankani bay capsized in Kinniya, in the early hours of Tuesday. Police spokesperson Nihal Talduwa said 25 to 35 passengers had been onboard the ferry. Eight rescue teams were deployed by the Sri Lanka Navy in a search and rescue operation, which was called off late Tuesday, after 20 passengers were rescued, 17 of who were hospitalized with injuries, including the 6-year-old who was admitted to intensive care unit.

Among the dead reported on Tuesday were a 70-year-old male, a 30-year-old woman and her two children - son age 6 and daughter aged 3 1/2 years - and two sisters from the same family. A tense situation was reported in Kinniya following the incident Tuesday, with the public clashing with the police, while protesting against the incompetency of the authorities. News footage showed angry residents burning tyres outside the Kinniya Divisional Secretariat office. Local media reports said the Kinniya house of Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) MP M.S. Thowfeek, had also been attacked by the residents. The police later arrested four people over the incident, including the Kinniya Urban Council Chairman, who is alleged to have provided a permit to operate the ferry; the owner of the ferry and two ferry operators. They have been remanded until December 8 by the Trincomalee Magistrate. -ENCL

Price of bread, short eats, kottu increased

COLOMBO - The price of wheat flour based items including bread and the popular 'kottu' were increased effective midnight Sunday (28). The All Ceylon Bakery Owners' Association, upping the prices of a 450g loaf of bread by Rs 10, attributed the hike to an increase in wheat flour prices. Shortage of wheat flour was reported from several areas in the country, with traders in Pettah attributing the shortage to a drop in supply. Wheat flour prices have also been increased by Rs 18.50 a kilo.

The Association also said the price of 'Kottu' and various other wheat flour based bakery products will also increase by Rs 5 from midnight Sunday. President of the All Ceylon Bakery Owners' Association, N.K. Jayawardena said a situation has arisen where the bakery industry cannot be maintained any longer and that bakery owners are facing several serious issues. He said that it was the first time in history that the price of wheat flour has increased by Rs 18.50. -ENCL

Cardinal unhappy as Easter attack trial starts

COLOMBO - As Sri Lanka's High Court began the trial of 25 men accused of plotting the Easter Sunday terror attack, a Catholic leader repeated his demand for further investigation to reveal a suspected larger plot linked to the atrocity. Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith of Colombo demanded to know the "real culprits" behind the serial blasts, suggesting attempts to cover up the crime. "I urge all Catholics to stand together until the issue is resolved," he said, asking all Catholic priests and nuns to prioritize working for the victims of the explosions that killed 269 people and injured over 500 on Easter Sunday 2019. A local Islamic extremist group, National Thowheeth Jama'ath, was identified as carrying out the suicide attacks that targeted three churches and four hotels across the country. After a protracted investigation, police have filed over 23,000 charges against 25 men accusing them of involvement in the bombings, including conspiracy to murder. The top court's trial began on Wednesday (24). The probe took several dramatic political turns after a presidential commission, meant to fix responsibilities for the government's security lapses, suggested the involvement of high-ranking politicians and security officials in allowing the attacks. The commission's report said that "further investigations will be needed to understand whether those with vested interests did not act on intelligence so as to create chaos

and instil fear and uncertainty in the country in the lead up to the presidential election." It further said that such a chaotic situation "would then lead to the call for a change of regime to contain such acts of terrorism ... fear would be unleashed months away from the presidential election ... These are extremely serious observations that can impact the democratic governance, electoral processes and security of Sri Lanka and must require urgent attention." In the November 2019 presidential election, Gotabaya Rajapaksa unseated Maithripala Sirisena and became president. In the run-up to the election, Rajapaksa blamed Sirisena for lax security in the country and promised justice to the victims of the Easter attacks. Catholic officials now express frustration at the Rajapaksa administration's inability to find the "real culprits" behind the violence that killed hundreds, including several innocent children and women inside churches. "Who did the evil deed? Why did they do it? Our struggle will not stop until we find the truth," Cardinal Ranjith said while addressing a gathering in the Church of the Holy Spirit in Wadduwa, a beach town in Western Province. "We are increasingly realizing that there was a bigger program beneath what appeared on the surface of the attack. There are a lot of reasons for that," the cardinal said on the day the court began the trial. -ucanews.com

UK mother makes desperate appeal on behalf of adopted Sri Lankan twins

LONDON - A London mother who needs emergency heart treatment in the UK is battling the UK government over its refusal to allow her adopted twins to travel with her from Sri Lanka. Lisa Keerthichandira and her husband Dash fell in love with Lavinia and Aria at an orphanage in Sri Lanka when the children were six months old and adopted them in 2019. The couple from Enfield, who moved temporarily to Sri Lanka in 2013 and have since divided their time between their two homes, say they have been told

by UK passport officials they cannot bring the children back to the UK, where Lisa needs to undergo treatment. The 44-year-old business owner has been diagnosed with unstable angina, putting her at risk of a sudden heart attack. Lawyers and visa experts insist the twins, now three, are eligible for British passports. However Lisa says UK emergency passport officials told her to leave them in care while she flies home for an indefinite hospital stay. This is despite the children having British adoption certificates and

UK passport-carrying parents. She told the Standard: "It is crazy that anybody in a UK government organization would deem it acceptable to advise traumatized children be put back into care. It was horrific. "When you are a mum, you don't fear for your life for yourself but for your babies. It wouldn't be possible to return to the UK for treatment without the girls. "They have never had a single day without me and for me to disappear would just be another huge trauma that they wouldn't understand."

Health experts are unable to treat Lisa in Sri Lanka, where the family currently live, due to complications surrounding her existing condition known as Ehlers Danlos Syndrome (EDS). Doctors agreed it was much safer for her to fly home and be placed under the immediate care of her EDS specialist and cardiologists. The family says it faces having to pay £8,000 in visa and legal fees on top of the £3,000 already spent while experts cannot agree on how to bring the children home from their house near Colombo.

Her condition means she often has to stay indoors, still struggles to breathe and is unable to pick up her children. The family are now preparing an appeal via their lawyers in Sri Lanka. The Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office states it would not advise someone to prefer children into care and would recommend Pre-emptive arrangements. A UK government spokesperson said: "We have been in contact with a British National and provided advice related to their application for Emergency Travel Documents." -Evening Standard

HOT TOPICS



A technician works in the laboratory run by Tulo De Oliveira, at the Nelson Mandela School of Medicine in Durban, South Africa, Nov. 15, 2021. One nation after another shut its doors to southern Africa over the weekend, even as they spurned public health measures that scientists said were far more urgently needed to take on the Omicron variant of COVID-19. *—Joaquim Silva/THE NEW YORK TIMES*

As Omicron variant circles the globe, African nations face blame and bans

By Benjamin Mueller and Declan Walsh

Nations in southern Africa protested bitterly Saturday (27) as more of the world's wealthiest countries cut them off from travel, renewing a debate over border closures from the earliest days of the coronavirus pandemic and compounding the problems facing poorly vaccinated countries.

A new coronavirus variant called Omicron, first detected in Botswana, put governments on edge after South Africa announced a surge of cases this week, plunging countries into the most uncertain moment of the pandemic since the highly contagious Delta variant took hold this past spring.

As in the early days of Delta, political alarm spread quickly across the world, with officials trading blame over how the failures of the global vaccination effort were allowing the virus to mutate, even as researchers warned that the true threat of the new variant was not yet clear.

Bearing a worrying number of mutations that researchers fear could make it spread easily, Omicron was spotted Saturday in patients in Britain, Germany and Italy, leaving in its wake what scientists estimated to be thousands of cases in southern Africa and tens or hundreds more globally. One nation after another shut its doors to southern Africa even as they spurned public health measures that scientists said were far more urgently needed to take on the new variant.

Australia, Thailand and Sri Lanka were among the latest countries Saturday to join the United States, Britain and the European Union in banning travellers from South Africa and nearby countries.

Israel announced the world's strictest ban to date, sealing its borders to all foreigners for 14 days after one case was confirmed in the country. "The key here is caution and minimal risks until we know more," Prime Minister Naftali Bennett of Israel said at a news conference just after midnight local time Sunday.

Health officials in the Netherlands announced that 61 passengers on two flights from South Africa had tested positive for the virus, the latest indication of how difficult it might be to stop the variant from crossing borders.

The cascade of travel closures triggered a wave of resentment among Africans who believed that the continent was yet again bearing the brunt of panicked policies from Western countries, which had failed to deliver vaccines and the resources needed to administer them.

Richer countries, having already hoarded vaccines for much of 2021, were now penalizing parts of the world that they had starved of shots in the first place, scientists said.

"Told you so," said Francis Venter, a researcher at University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, referring to warnings from African researchers that delaying vaccinations there risked the emergence of new variants. "It feels like these rich countries have learned absolutely nothing in terms of support."

The sense of outrage was most visceral in South Africa, where business leaders predicted a dire economic toll, especially on tourism. In the arrivals halls of Johannesburg's OR Tambo International Airport, Ronald Maswa, a tour operator, watched with dread as the information board flipped to red, displaying cancellation notices. Three clients had already cancelled trips overnight, and he feared that many more would follow.

Some health officials said that the travel bans may buy some time to figure out how to deal with the new variant. But just as border closures a year ago did little to stop the spread of an earlier coronavirus variant from Britain, scientists said, the latest travel shutdowns had likely come too late.

Scientists worried that the restrictions would discourage other nations from reporting variant cases, out of fear of being slapped with travel bans. Border closures have provoked debate during a succession of public health crises,

including the Ebola outbreak in 2014, with global health officials warning that such bans can interrupt the flow of medical supplies and do economic damage that makes countries reluctant to report health threats.

The chaotic introduction of the closures in Amsterdam on Friday (26) left some 600 passengers on two flights from South Africa crammed into planes and then unventilated rooms for about 30 hours. Those who avoided hotel quarantines by testing negative scattered to other destinations after receiving results around 3 a.m. Saturday.

"You close down the boundary with Africa, then you close the boundary with Belgium, then you close the boundary with somewhere else," said Alessandro Vespignani, a professor at Northeastern University in Boston who has studied travel restrictions from early 2020 and advised government agencies in recent days on responses to the latest variant. "But every time you close it, it's a little late."

It remains unclear whether the Omicron variant will transmit as easily as global health officials fear. The variant may simply have been in the right place during a surge of new infections in South Africa, making it appear more contagious than it really is.

But scientists said the border closures would wreak havoc in African countries that were counting on reopening. In South Africa, December is traditionally the high season for tourism, one of the country's biggest industries, and operators had been banking on a surge in visitors from Britain, which had removed South Africa from its "red list" only last month.

"This is devastating," said David Frost, CEO of the Southern Africa Tourism Services Association. "Many companies have been hanging on by their fingernails, and this is going to wipe them out. It's going to be dire for conservation, and it's going to be dire for people in rural areas where tourism is the only economic generator."

South Africa's number of daily infections — 2,828 on Friday — was a small fraction of case counts in countries with similarly sized populations, like Germany and Britain, not to mention the United States. For Frost, the hurried measures were the mark of a blatant double standard.

Just over 10% of people in Africa have received one dose of a vaccine, compared with 64% in North America and 62% in Europe. For the countries imposing travel bans, scientists said, far more consequential than delaying the arrival of new Omicron cases was the question of what they would do with whatever time they had bought themselves to respond.

At home, scientists said, those countries should ramp up testing and vaccinations and help infected people isolate, especially given the difficulties they were already having containing the delta variant. Scientists pleaded with countries to match those efforts globally, including with aid to southern Africa for their health systems and vaccination and variant-tracking efforts.

"If all we do is a travel ban, and we don't increase testing at airports or provide resources for people to isolate if they do test positive so they can justify missing work — all of that would have to be happening to reduce community transmission," said Joseph Fauver, an assistant professor studying genomic surveillance at the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

After decades of skepticism toward border closures among global health officials, COVID-19 forced experts to re-examine their views, said Alexandra Phelan, a professor studying global health policy at Georgetown University. "We gained a bit of nuance and realized that travel restrictions have a potential role to play in slowing the spread of a new respiratory disease, even though it doesn't stop it," she said.

Still, Vespignani and his colleagues have shown that even the strictest travel restrictions only modestly delay the spread of the virus

without other efforts to cut transmission. And whereas countries had some hope in early 2020 of tracing the contacts of patients from abroad, sequencing the virus takes too long to allow health officials to pick out people infected with the Omicron variant for special containment measures.

"They get dispersed in a sea of thousands and thousands of infections," Vespignani said of a very new case of the Omicron variant. "It's a very, very, very tough situation."

The latest variant has already shown signs of spreading locally beyond southern Africa. A patient in Belgium, for instance, had no connections with southern Africa, having travelled recently to Egypt, officials said. Several scientists said they suspected that the variant had been spreading undetected in countries with lax testing and sequencing efforts before it surfaced in Botswana and South Africa, giving it more time to scatter globally. Nevertheless, European nations did not find the variant until after South Africa alerted them to it, demonstrating the gaps in their own surveillance efforts. The variant had plenty of opportunities to spread: In November, there were 334 flights scheduled out of southern Africa into Europe, with a capacity of nearly 100,000 seats. And three dozen flights were scheduled from Johannesburg into the United States this month.

Given the uneven global sequencing efforts, Jennifer Nuzzo, a public health researcher at Johns Hopkins University, said that it was difficult to target individual countries for border closures. She warned that travel bans created a false sense of security, giving cover to elected leaders who wanted to avoid more difficult choices.

"The notion of having a global map of where the variants are and aren't is just fantasy," she said. "I don't think the travel bans really have much of an impact, other than answering the political pressures that inevitably arise when a new variant emerges."

Shahir Madhi, a virus expert at University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, cautioned that the Omicron variant could yet fizzle out as other seemingly worrisome versions of the virus had done. He said it was a reflection of a lack of political and economic power that southern Africa was so quickly cut off by wealthy countries despite the uncertain evidence.

With roughly one-third of South Africans vaccinated, officials there blame a number of factors, including vaccine hesitancy caused by rampant online misinformation. Some critics have blamed a bungled government response. For now, South Africa has far more vaccine doses than it can distribute in time, forcing senior health officials to defer some planned deliveries.

Other African countries where shortages have eased are also reporting difficulties getting vaccines into people's arms. Many lack the necessary freezers and other storage capacity. Last month, Uganda warned that two-thirds of the 9 million vaccines it had received risked expiring by the end of the year.

In the United States, health officials say they are better equipped to track variants than earlier in the pandemic. Scientists can identify Omicron with a standard nasal swab test, giving them a leg up in tracking the spread of the variant.

But the United States is suffering so many daily infections that many samples are being overlooked. And there are pockets of the country where relatively few cases are being sequenced. In the last 90 days, for instance, Massachusetts sequenced one-fifth of all coronavirus cases in the state, according to an online sequencing database. Texas and Florida, on the other hand, did so for only 4% of cases.

"I'm definitely more confident in our ability to track and detect the virus," Fauver said. "What I'm not confident in is our ability to control transmission."

—New York Times

How Omicron, the new COVID-19 variant, got its name

By Vimal Patel

Markets plunged Friday (26), hope of taming the coronavirus dimmed and a new term entered the pandemic lexicon: Omicron.

The COVID-19 variant that emerged in South Africa was named after the 15th letter of the Greek alphabet.

The naming system, announced by the World Health Organization (WHO) in May, makes public communication about variants easier and less confusing, the agency and experts said.

For example, the variant that emerged in India is not popularly known as B.1.617.2. Rather, it is known as Delta, the fourth letter of the Greek alphabet.

There are now seven "variants of interest" or "variants of concern," and they each have a Greek letter, according to a WHO tracking page.

Some other variants with Greek letters do not reach those classification levels, and the WHO also skipped two letters just before Omicron — 'nu' and 'xi' — leading to speculation about whether 'xi' was avoided in deference to the Chinese president, Xi Jinping.

'Nu' is too easily confounded with 'new,' Tarik Jasarevic, a spokesperson, said Saturday (27). "And 'xi' was not used because it is a common last name."

He added that the agency's best practices for naming diseases suggest avoiding "causing offense to any cultural, social, national, regional, professional or ethnic groups."

Some of the better-known variants, such as delta, rose to a variant of concern. Others in that category were named Alpha, Beta and Gamma. Others that emerged, which were variants of interest, were named Lambda and Mu. Other Greek letters were used for variants that did not meet those thresholds but 'nu' and 'xi' were the only ones that were skipped.

The WHO has promoted the naming system as simple and accessible, unlike the variants' scientific names, which "can be difficult to say and recall, and are prone to misreporting," it said.

Some researchers agree.

Dr. Angela Rasmussen, a virologist at the University of Saskatchewan, said she conducted many interviews with reporters this year, before the Greek naming system was announced, and she stumbled through confusing explanations about the B.1.1.7 and B.1.351 variants. They are now known as Alpha, which emerged in the United Kingdom, and Beta, which emerged in South Africa.

"It makes it really cumbersome to talk about when you're constantly using an alphabet soup of variant designations," she said, adding, "Ultimately people end up calling it the UK variant or the South African variant."

That's the other big reason that the WHO moved to the Greek naming system, Rasmussen said: The older naming convention was unfair to the people where the virus emerged. The agency called the practice of describing variants by the places they were detected "stigmatizing and discriminatory."

The practice of naming viruses for regions has also historically been misleading, Rasmussen said. Ebola, for example, is named for a river that's actually far from where the virus emerged.

"From the very beginning of the pandemic, I remember people saying: 'We called it the Spanish flu. Why don't we call it the Wuhan coronavirus?'" Rasmussen said. "The Spanish flu did not come from Spain. We don't know where it emerged from, but there's a very good possibility it emerged from the US."

The WHO encouraged national authorities and media outlets to adopt the new labels. They do not replace the technical names, which convey important information to scientists and will continue to be used in research.

—New York Times

Chaos for passengers in Amsterdam

One sign of a scattershot response to the variant

By Jason Horowitz and Claire Moses

AMSTRADAM — As more countries placed travel bans on southern Africa early Saturday for fear of a new and possibly more dangerous variant of the coronavirus, the passengers on two flights from South Africa found themselves caught in a pandemic nightmare.

After about 30 hours squeezed together in the planes, crammed buses and then in waiting rooms, 61 of the more than 500 passengers on those flights had tested positive and been quarantined. They were being checked for Omicron, named by the World Health Organization (WHO) on Friday (26) as a "variant of concern," its most serious category.

Everyone else, according to Stephanie Nolen, The New York Times's global health reporter, who was one of the planes, "has scattered to the world."

The chaos in Amsterdam seemed emblematic of the varied, and often scattershot, responses to the virus across the world, with masking rules, national testing requirements and vaccine mandates differing from country to country and continent to continent. Such gaps could open avenues for contagion, especially for a potentially threatening new variant.

"That number of people seems like a very high number to have this happen," Andrew Pekosz, an public health researcher from Johns Hopkins University said. "Unless there's really tremendous amounts of spread of this virus locally that was not detected."

The omicron variant is likely to be found in some of those 61 passengers who tested positive, Dutch public health officials announced Saturday. The sequencing is still being performed by the Dutch agency for disease control and prevention. It was unclear how many passengers may have tested positive for the variant.

Those who tested positive for the coronavirus at Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport on Friday have been transferred to quarantine hotels. Those who tested negative could continue their journey or, if the Netherlands was their final destination, were told to quarantine at home.

The government is also telling thousands of people who have returned from southern Africa in the past few days to get tested, even if they don't have symptoms.

There is still relatively little known about omicron. It has mutations that scientists fear could make it more infectious and less susceptible to vaccines — although neither of these effects is yet to be established.

—New York Times



New Omicron cases detected as coronavirus variant spreads

JOHANNESBURG, South Africa - New cases of the Omicron coronavirus variant have been detected around the world, with two cases reported in Australia, as more countries try to seal themselves off by imposing travel restrictions.

First discovered in South Africa, Omicron has since been recorded in the Netherlands, Denmark, Belgium, Botswana, Germany, Hong Kong, Israel, Italy and the United Kingdom.

The discovery of Omicron, dubbed a 'variant of concern' on Friday by the World Health Organization, sparked worries that it could resist vaccines and prolong the nearly two-year COVID pandemic.

Omicron is potentially more contagious than previous variants, but experts do not know yet if it will cause more or less severe COVID-19.

Countries have imposed a wave of travel bans or curbs on southern Africa. In the most far-reaching effort to keep the variant at bay, Israel announced late on Saturday it would ban the entry of all foreigners and reintroduce counterterrorism phone-tracking technology to contain the spread of the variant.

Indonesia bans arrivals from eight African countries

Indonesia will ban the entry of travellers who have been in eight African countries and extend quarantine times for all arrivals to curb the spread of the Omicron variant, officials have said.

The ban extends to people who have been in South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Mozambique, Eswatini or Nigeria in the past 14 days. Delegates attending G20 meetings, which Indonesia chairs, will not be affected. Denmark registers Omicron variant in two travellers

Denmark has registered two cases of the new Omicron coronavirus variant in travellers from the Omicron COVID-19 variant ground in Africa, according to the country's infectious disease authority.

"This was to be expected, and our strategy is therefore to continue intensive monitoring of the infection in the country," Henrik Ullum, CEO of the Statens Serum Institute, said in a statement.

The two people, who flew to Denmark by plane, have been put in isolation and authorities are tracing any close contacts. 'Absolute chaos' in South Africa as flights grounded

Disbelief and confusion washed over South Africa as the announcement of the discovery of the Omicron COVID-19 variant grounded flights and raised fears of a hard lockdown in Africa's most developed economy.

Flights from the country to the United States, United Kingdom and nations in Europe were swiftly banned after South African scientists officially announced the discovery of the virus strain on Thursday.

Dutch authorities find 13 cases of Omicron variant

Dutch health authorities have said that 13 cases of the new Omicron coronavirus variant have



Travellers arrive in Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam, the Netherlands - Eva Fleiter/Reuters

been found in the Netherlands among passengers who were on flights from South Africa earlier this week.

The National Institute for Public Health (RIVM) confirmed the cases in a statement. UK to enforce new COVID rules from Tuesday

Britain's government has defended the pace and scale of its response to the new Omicron strain of COVID-19 against criticism that it was again falling behind the curve.

Health Secretary Sajid Javid said mandatory mask-wearing will return to shops and public transport in England on Tuesday, and told families to plan for Christmas "as normal", despite new rules to tackle the Omicron variant.

Also from Tuesday, all passengers arriving in Britain are being instructed to take a PCR test for COVID-19 and self-isolate until they register negative.

Dozens on South Africa flights test positive for COVID in Netherlands

Dutch health authorities say they have detected 61 COVID-19 cases among people who flew in from South Africa.

In a statement on Saturday, the Dutch Health Authority (GDD) said that the cases were discovered among 624 passengers who arrived at Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport on two flights on Friday.

Israel tightens travel restrictions over new COVID variant

Israel says it will ban the entry of all foreigners into the country, making it the first nation to shut its borders completely in response to a new and potentially more contagious coronavirus variant.

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett said the ban, pending government approval, would last 14 days.

Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Sudan ban flights from African countries

Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Sudan have suspended flights with a number of African countries due to Omicron.

Saudi state news agency SPA, citing a source with the interior ministry, said direct flights with Angola, Comoros, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Seychelles and Zambia had been suspended.

On Friday, the kingdom banned flights from Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe amid Omicron fears.

Bahrain also banned passengers from Angola, Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia, according to the state news agency, BNA. Bahraini nationals and holders of valid visas to Bahrain, however, were allowed to enter.

Health authorities in Sudan also banned flights from Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe over the variant.

Omicron variant likely in France: Health minister

Omicron is probably already circulating in France, its health minister said, adding that the government was tightening restrictions to contain it.

"Once the variant is circulating in England, Italy, in Belgium, it is probable that there are already cases in circulation here. We will identify them and (...) we will slow down its spread as much as possible," Olivier Veran told reporters at a vaccination centre in Paris.

France is in the midst of a fifth wave of the virus. It recorded more than 37,000 positive cases on Saturday and a sharp rise in the number of patients in intensive care.

- Al Jazeera and News Agencies

Medical students helping to fight covid get a holiday gift

TENNESSEE, USA - For 956 students at one of the largest historically Black medical colleges, an unexpected gift of gratitude arrived in their bank accounts just in time for Thanksgiving.

The students, from Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee, have been pivotal in helping their city keep coronavirus testing sites staffed for the last 19 months - and, more recently, in helping run vaccination clinics.

"That work inspired Dr. James Hildreth, Meharry's president, to send each student \$10,000 Wednesday.

The money comes from the \$40 billion in federal coronavirus relief funds earmarked for colleges and universities. Schools are required to spend at least half on emergency grants to students. Some historically Black colleges and universities have used the funds to ease student debt. Hildreth did not tell Meharry students how to spend the cash infusion, although he did offer advice.

"It is important that by giving to our students who will soon give so much to our world," he said in the video. He added, "The \$10,000 is yours to manage, but I would be remiss if I didn't strongly advise you this Thanksgiving to be good stewards of what you've been given. I know Black Friday shopping is tempting, but you'd be well advised to use the funds to pay expenses related to your education and training."

The pandemic has been a difficult time for Meharry students, requiring virtual classes, shortened clinical rotations and delayed licensing exams, said Dwight Johnson II, a fourth-year student from Brownsville, Tennessee, who is his class chaplain. "Many of us had family members and friends that passed away," Johnson said. "Also, prior to the release of vaccinations, going into hospitals each day knowing that you may be exposed to COVID and have to be taken out of your rotations for quarantine was an extremely stressful experience."

His announcement came as Johnson, 27, was selling his couch for \$50. "I plan on using the money to alleviate some of my debt, study resources for my upcoming licensing exam, and for my honeymoon, as I'll be getting married in May," he said. "My fiancée is also a fourth-year medical student at Meharry, so this gift completely changed how we'll be able to begin our lives together."

UK to enforce new Covid rules from Tuesday

LONDON - Britain's government on Sunday (28) defended the pace and scale of its response to the new Omicron strain of Covid-19 against criticism that it was again falling behind the curve.

Health Secretary Sajid Javid said mandatory mask-wearing will return to shops and public transport in England on Tuesday, and told families to plan for Christmas "as normal", despite new rules to combat the Omicron variant.

Also from Tuesday, all passengers arriving in Britain are being instructed to take a PCR test for Covid-19, and self-isolate until they register negative.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson had announced the tougher measures at a hastily arranged news conference on Saturday, but did not specify when they would take effect.

Johnson and other senior conservatives were widely criticised for his travel and quarantine policy earlier in the pandemic, when he kept borders open to foreign travellers even as infection rates spiralled, yielding Britain one of the world's worst per-capita death tolls from Covid.

The government controversially dropped the masks mandate in July for England, after a prior lockdown, but the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland had kept it in place.

All four UK nations are expected to adopt the same PCR rule, after England again diverged in July by requiring only a simple lateral flow test for incoming passengers on flights, ships and trains.

Travel from 10 countries in southern Africa is now banned because of Omicron, but Javid conceded that hundreds of passengers had arrived on flights from South Africa on Friday without being tested.

But he told BBC television: "I think the speed at which we acted at could not have been any faster."

Javid ruled out reintroducing social distancing rules and work-from-home guidance, which were also controversially discarded in England earlier this year against the advice of government scientists.

Javid said it was too early to judge the effectiveness of existing vaccines against Omicron, as drugs manufacturers rush to research new treatments against the emergent strain.

But the government is seeking approval from its Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) to expand the rollout of booster jobs, shortening the time-frame between second and third shots, and broadening the age range to all over-18s.

The JCVI is expected to respond early next week, Javid said. He added that no further cases of Omicron had been detected in Britain, after the government on Saturday confirmed the first two cases, both linked to travel from southern Africa.

The opposition Labour party said the government was again doing too little, too late after Omicron emerged. Even after Tuesday, passengers can enter Britain without a pre-departure test and travel freely from their port of entry on public transport, Labour's foreign affairs spokeswoman Lisa Nandy said.

"We desperately want to see them tighten up the travel restrictions," she said on Sky News.

"There is a real problem when for 18 months the government has been warned that there are holes in those defences and still hasn't taken action to plug them."

- AFP

French minister flies to Caribbean islands after mooting autonomy

PARIS - A French minister flew to the protest-hit islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique in the Caribbean on Sunday after raising the possibility of giving the Paris-ruled territories greater autonomy.

Sebastien Lecorun, who is responsible for overseas French territories, said Friday the government was ready to discuss giving the islands a degree of self-government in a bid to end more than 10 days of protests and rioting sparked by Covid-19 restrictions.

It sparked immediate condemnation from opposition politicians and five months ahead of presidential elections, with far-right Marine Le Pen accusing him of "trying to buy off the most radical independence groups" and being ready to "give away" the islands.

In an interview published Sunday in the Journal du Dimanche newspaper, Lecorun defended the idea and denied opening the door to them splitting from France.

"Autonomy is certainly not independence: it already exists for certain overseas territories to various degrees," he explained.

An aide to the minister told AFP that the situation was "calm" on both islands overnight on Saturday-Sunday.

Former colonial-power France saw most of its overseas possessions seek independence around 60 years ago, but it retains control over 12 territories in the Indian and Pacific Oceans as well as in the Caribbean.

They are home to 2.6 million French people. Guadeloupe and Martinique are ruled as if they were on mainland France, but locals complain about higher-than-average poverty levels, poorer public services and official neglect.

Other islands such as French Polynesia in the Pacific have already been granted autonomy, while the Pacific Islands of New Caledonia are to vote next month in the third of three independence referendums. The often violent protests on Guadeloupe were started by hardline opponents of compulsory vaccination for health workers and firefighters on the island - a measure already implemented in mainland France.

"They have since spread to Martinique and morphed into a larger movement to express frustration at Paris. In a first announcement intended to defuse the anger over compulsory vaccinations, the French government has proposed pushing back the deadline until December 31."

Vaccination rates on the Caribbean islands trail those on the mainland with less than half the population inoculated on Guadeloupe compared with 75 percent of the whole French population. **- AFP**

US Navy rescues Iran seamen adrift in Gulf for 8 days

MANAMA - The US Navy has rescued two Iranian seamen who had been adrift for eight days on a fishing boat in Gulf waters, a statement said on Sunday (28). The men were in "good health and spirits" despite their ordeal, the navy said.

The US Navy rescued two Iranian mariners (on Saturday) from a fishing vessel after it was adrift for eight days in the Gulf of Oman, the US Naval Forces Central Command, or NAVCENT, said.

Navy cargo ship Charles Drew arrived at the scene with food, water and medical care six hours after the distress call from the mariners. The statement said. The two men were transported to an Omani coastguard vessel near the capital Muscat. "The mariners were in good health and spirits at the time of the transfer," it added.

"We appreciate the government of Oman for its assistance and support in helping us return the mariners home," NAVCENT commander Vice Admiral Brad Cooper said in the statement.

The United States and its regional allies share concerns about Iran, which has previously been accused of orchestrating attacks on shipping in the region.

Tehran rejects the allegations. Since February, Iran and its arch-enemy Israel have been accused of engaging in what analysts have called a "shadow war", in which vessels linked to each nation have come under attack in tight-for-tight exchanges in waters around the Gulf.

Earlier this month, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain held their first joint naval exercise with Israel, together with the US, a year after normalising ties with the Jewish state. **- AFP**

Difficult winter in store for German economy, experts warn

NUREMBERG - The German economy is in for a tough winter, according to economists from leading financial and economic institutes surveyed by dpa.

"After the summer economic boom, there is likely to be enough for mini-growth at best at the turn of the year," said Katharina Ullrich of the Allianz Group.

Mark Schattgenberg of Deutsche Bank predicted zero growth in the coming months, as Germany's fourth wave of Covid-19 infections clouded sentiment. "I expect economic growth to stagnate in the winter half-year," he said.

Germany ranked far behind its eurozone neighbours in terms of economic growth, with Utermoehli forecasting only 2.7 per cent growth for the country in the current year. Across the 19-member currency union, growth is forecast of around 5 per cent.

In Germany, rampant infection rates have led to a slump in consumer spending, which had until now offset structural problems in industry.

"We are seeing consumption in the service sector also cloud over again," said Veronika Grimm, a member of the German government's Council of Economic Experts, known informally as the "wise men."

However, she noted that "the impact on the economy will remain limited," pointing out that the economic sectors mainly affected, such as culture, tourism and gastronomy, are industries that account for only a small share of gross value added.

Nevertheless, the chief economist of the state-owned banking group KfW, Fritz Koehler-Geib, also admitted that the outlook was not great. "In view of these setbacks, all economic analysts have revised their forecasts for the current year significantly downward," she said. **- dpa**

German president calls on public to restrict contacts

BERLIN - German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier has called on the public to restrict their number of contacts as a fourth wave of Covid-19 infections hits the country.

Meanwhile, fears grow about the arrival of a new variant. "It is important that we all act together now," Steinmeier wrote in an editorial for Bild am Sonntag newspaper. "Let's stick to the rules, let's reduce our contacts once again. Let's do it so that schools and childcare centres don't close again, so that

we don't have to completely shut down public life again."

His comments came a day after the German health authorities announced a record number of Covid-19 cases. In some regions, patients were transferred to other states as hospital wards filled up.

Meanwhile, more and more hospitals are postponing elective surgery.

Regular, scheduled operations are no longer possible in more than three quarters of the country's hospitals, according to the German Hospital Association. Hospitals

would otherwise be unable to provide care for acute cases, said its chair Gerald Gass.

Acting Research Minister Anja Karliczek called on lawmakers to impose regulations requiring people to restrict their contacts, also for those who are fully vaccinated, in line with the recommendations of the Leopoldina Academy of Sciences.

"Politicians should follow the advice of science without hesitation. We must not lose any more time," Karliczek told dpa.

The National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina called for the swift imposition

of contact bans for of several weeks, also for those who have been vaccinated against Covid-19, in order to counter the fourth wave of cases.

The institute also called for an expansion of the booster vaccination campaign and for compulsory vaccination, at least for health workers.

The discussion of responses to the fourth wave of cases has gained greater urgency with the arrival of Omicron, a new and potentially more transmissible strain of Covid-19. **- AFP**

Omicron, first detected in South Africa this month, has been classified as a "variant of concern" by the World Health Organization (WHO).

Germany's first two cases of the Omicron variant have been confirmed in Munich, the Bavarian health minister said on Saturday.

The European Centre for Disease Control has said that the strain could significantly reduce the effectiveness of the available vaccines and increase the risk of reinfection. **- dpa**

HEALTH

By Catherine Manning and Gaia Scerif

How moving dots are helping us learn more about dyslexia in children

AROUND one in ten children in the UK have dyslexia, a developmental condition which means that they struggle to learn to read. It often causes difficulties in spelling too.

Reading and spelling involve mapping what we see on a page to correspond to spoken language and meaning. So, reading difficulties could at least in part be caused by differences in how the brain processes visual information (how the brain makes sense of what we see).

One visual skill that has been found to differ between people with and without dyslexia is the ability to accurately judge the direction of motion, which essentially means how we work out the direction of moving objects.

In a display of dots moving in different directions, people with dyslexia tend to need more dots to be moving in the same direction in order to accurately judge the overall direction. But until now, we have not really understood why this ability is affected. We wanted to try to find out, to get a better understanding of how the brain develops differently in children with dyslexia.

How children with dyslexia perceive motion

One possibility is that a pathway in the brain that is required for perceiving motion develops differently. This pathway is specialised for processing information that changes rapidly over time, such as moving objects which change in location over time, or speech sounds, which change in frequency over time. That is how we distinguish one sound from another.

There are many processing stages involved in making a judgement about the direction of a moving object. Not only do we have to first encode the visual information, by seeing the object. We then have to gather enough evidence about which way it is moving so that we



Children with dyslexia seem to find it more difficult to judge the direction of moving dots - this could explain why reading is also more challenging.

can make a decision about it, before we can then respond. That might be moving towards a ball to catch it, for example.

So far, it hasn't been clear where the differences lie in people with dyslexia. In our recent study, we wanted to find out whether it is the early sensory encoding or the decision-making stages, or both, which are affected.

Children were presented with patterns of moving dots in child-friendly games and asked to work out their overall direction across two tasks. They had to press a button to say whether they were going 'left' or 'right'. We also measured children's brain activity using an EEG cap on their heads.

Then we analyzed how accurate children were, and how long they took to make their responses, using a mathematical model. The results of this model showed that children with dyslexia were slower to gather evidence, and decide on the direction of the dots, compared to the children without dyslexia. While an earlier study reached

a similar conclusion, we were also able to link this behavioural difference in dyslexia to differences in their brain activity measured using EEG.

When making decisions on the direction of dot movement, children showed a gradual ramping up of brain activity measured by sensors positioned at the centre of their heads. Importantly, this ramping up was more gradual in children with dyslexia, which corresponded to the slower rate at which they gathered evidence in our mathematical model.

We also analyzed the early EEG responses to visual motion, from when the children first saw the moving dots. This suggested that early sensory processing - the initial seeing of the moving dots - is similar in all the children who took part in the study.

Taken together, our findings show that children with and without dyslexia do not seem to differ in how they initially process visual information, but instead in how they make decisions about it.

They seemed to see the moving dots just as easily as we did, but to decide in which direction they were moving.

Possible effect on reading ability

Although words are motionless, differences in these motion tasks could influence children's ability to read. That's because the sounds that make up language change quickly over time - just like a moving dot - so rely on the brain processes that can detect these changes well. The ability to process the rapidly changing sounds that make up a language are involved in phonological processing, which has been extensively linked to dyslexia and basically means using the sounds that make up a language to process spoken and written language.

If children with dyslexia are slower to make decisions about the direction of movement, they may also find it more difficult to differentiate between sounds in the spoken word. In turn, this could make reading more difficult as it is so dependent on spoken language and meaning.

We now want to find out whether children with dyslexia are slower to make decisions for other types of information which we collect through our senses, or whether the differences just relate to visual motion.

Another area of interest, is whether other skills - such as general processing speed and cognitive ability - are related to both the decision-making and reading difficulties.

These studies are helping us to build a better picture of how the brain develops differently in children with dyslexia. Our findings demonstrate that dyslexia could affect more than just a child's reading and spelling abilities. It is important that we all bear this in mind when supporting children with dyslexia.

-theconversation.com

By Fran Fleming-Milici

Companies are pushing sweetened drinks to children through advertising and misleading labels

WALKING down the drink aisle at any grocery store will take you past hundreds of drinks, from sodas to sports drinks. Children's drink sections are filled with a vast array of products as well. Most parents want to buy what is healthy for their children, but with so many options in the drink aisle, it can be difficult to make the right choice - especially when drink companies make it hard to do so.

I am a researcher at the UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy and Health, and I've studied how food is marketed to kids and parents of young children for more than a decade. Companies spend huge sums advertising children's drinks with added sweeteners. Despite the sweeteners, companies market these drinks as healthy choices for kids.

In a recent study I co-authored with colleagues at the Rudd Center, we examined advertising and purchasing trends of children's drinks from 2006 to 2017. We found, not surprisingly, that ad spending drove people to buy the drinks being advertised. The problem is that companies spend tens of millions of dollars per year promoting sweetened children's drinks. This study was one of the first to directly tie that ad spending to household purchases of unhealthy beverages. In addition, we also found that households with lower incomes were more responsive to this advertising and purchased more sweetened children's fruit drinks than households with higher incomes.

Decades of research has shown that drinking too many sugary drinks can raise the risk of heart disease, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes and tooth decay. Advertising appears to increase

companies' profits, but not children's health.

Advertising and demographics

The food and beverage industry spends nearly US\$14 billion per year advertising their products, and around 80% of the spending promotes highly processed foods. This includes "fruit drinks" - fruit-flavored beverages with not much juice, like SunnyD - and flavored waters like Capri Sun Roarin' Waters. Both are marketed as being for children, but they contain ingredients health experts say kids should not consume, including added sugar, diet sweeteners or both.

In 2018, companies spent \$21 million advertising sweetened drinks across all media in the U.S. They spent \$18.5 million of that promoting sweetened children's drinks through TV ads. This was far more than the \$13.6 million companies spent on TV ads for unsweetened children's drinks like 100% juices and juice and water blends.

Marketing sugary drinks directly to young kids is another tactic that companies use.

In 2018, children 2 to 5 years old saw twice as many TV ads for sugary children's drinks than they did for unsweetened juice products. Some fruit drink brands also disproportionately targeted advertising to Spanish-speaking households as well as Black children. Even packaging is aimed at kids, with sweetened drinks featuring more cartoons, brand characters and wacky names compared to drinks without added sweeteners.

This advertising can undermine parents' efforts to serve healthy drinks.

To measure the effect of this advertising, my colleagues and I looked at 12 years of monthly purchase data. We found that people living

in households with lower incomes purchased significantly more sweetened fruit drinks and fewer unsweetened juices than people in households with higher income. People in non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic households also purchased more sweetened fruit drinks than non-Hispanic white households. This matches research that shows that communities of color and lower-income communities drink relatively more sugary drinks than other groups, which contributes to disparities in diet-related disease.

Lower prices

Advertising is one thing that drives consumption, but pricing strategies also add to demographic differences in purchases.

I've conducted focus groups with parents of young children, and they say they'd like to purchase 100% juice. But when these parents compare prices in the supermarket, they end up buying cheaper sweetened drinks instead of the healthier beverages they intended to buy.

The recent study shows that such price disparities are getting worse. Over the 12 years we covered, prices increased for all children's drink types, but sweetened children's fruit drinks increased by an average of just 1 cent per ounce, compared to the 4 cents-per-ounce increase of unsweetened juice products.

Misleading labels

Another way companies try to push sweetened drinks is to use labels that make them appear healthier than they really are. This happens in two main ways. First, sweetened drink labels often highlight nutrition-related claims - like "Vitamin C" or "Less sugar," for example. Second, these drinks often use pictures of fruit or words with no regulatory definitions - like "water" and "natural."

Taken together, these tactics mask ingredients such as added sugars and diet sweeteners and convey the idea that these drinks are healthy choices, which likely contribute to sales.

But this also often offers both sweetened and unsweetened drinks with nearly identical packaging and claims, so it is easy to see why parents misperceive what is in these drinks. I challenge any reader to head down a children's drink aisle in the supermarket and successfully separate the healthier drinks from the less healthy ones.

What to do?

Between the marketing, pricing and labels, it's no wonder kids are drinking more sugary drinks. Overall, our research found that purchases of sweetened flavored waters increased by 68% from 2006 to 2017. Today, households with young children purchase three times as many ounces of sweetened fruit drinks as unsweetened juice.

Reducing the amount of sweetened drinks kids consume when they are young could go a long way in keeping them healthy for a lifetime. Better industry self-regulation of advertising is one way to reduce this overconsumption, but the U.S. Food and Drug Administration could also get involved by mandating clear and consistent disclosures of added sugars and diet sweeteners, as well as juice percentages, on packaging. Reducing disproportionate targeted marketing of sugary drinks to communities of color would be a step in the right direction, too.

If you care about the health of children, the goal should be to make the healthy choice the easy choice. Unfortunately, our research seems to show a trend in the opposite direction.

-theconversation.com

By Jonathan R. Goodman

How disease has stimulated cultural change

IN his classic 1954 work, *The Gift*, the anthropologist Marcel Mauss described an unusual practice of gift-giving in the Maori people. People who didn't reciprocate gifts were believed to be vulnerable to illness - and possibly death. In this way, rituals of giving and receiving were linked with beliefs about sickness, giving disease a central position in cultural interactions.

In modern western society, by contrast, many people view infections only as biological threats to health and wellbeing, rather than essential elements of beliefs and cultural change. Some people expect that outbreaks of novel infectious disease are something humans periodically just need to deal with.

But disease isn't just a threat to our lives, as the Maori example indicates. It's an intricate and underappreciated stimulus of cultural change.

Diseases have had a devastating effect on human populations throughout history. If you take the history of infectious outbreaks together, from the bubonic plague of the Black Death in the 14th century to COVID today - infectious disease has killed more people than every war put together.

In fact, infectious diseases usually exploit the conditions created by war. During the Napoleonic wars eight times more people in the British army died from disease than from battle wounds. And because of the enormous threats these organisms pose, combined with a historic - and, arguably, ongoing - lack of communication with us, we've developed a huge number of rituals across cultures for responding to illness.

In some of our earliest recorded histories, laws surrounding disease were parts of everyday life. For example, among the Hittites, when the heathen god of power in Anatolia (modern-day Turkey) over 3,000 years ago, incorrectly disposing of the remains of a purification ritual used on a sick person was considered sorcery - which then, as in many cultures, was serious offense. And today, in Bihar, India, many traditional customs linked with hygiene, such as those practised around childbirth, are consistent with modern medical guidance.

Purification, or the removal of substances considered unclean, has also played a central role in many of our most widespread religions, including Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam - and few, if any, modern-day scientists would dispute the importance of personal hygiene for staying healthy.

But this also often offers both sweetened and unsweetened drinks with nearly identical packaging and claims, so it is easy to see why parents misperceive what is in these drinks. I challenge any reader to head down a children's drink aisle in the supermarket and successfully separate the healthier drinks from the less healthy ones.

It's when the same ritualistic behaviour is adopted by people in new environments - or even when the environments the rituals are being practised in change - that they can start to harm. For example, while bathing is a ritual for preventing many illnesses, performing purification rituals in contaminated water sources, such as the Ganges river in India, can be extremely dangerous.

Cultural mismatch

Where the link between ritualistic practices and health benefits is broken, we might, following the economist Nathan Nunn, call it a "cultural mismatch." And when scientific work helps us to identify these mismatches - such as bathing in contaminated waters - we should adjust our practices.

In each of the innumerable religions around the world, there have risen and died over the past several millennia, beliefs and rituals requiring a huge amount of shared cultural knowledge surround our relationships with disease. People didn't start using the centuries-old phrase "catching a cold" because we didn't understand germ theory, but because of a folk understanding of the circumstances under which people get sick. And in this, as well as so many other cases, modern-day scientific inquiry accords with folk understandings of the world, telling us just how much we can learn from the science of our ancestors.

The deep relationship between disease and human cultures may, lastly, give some insight into modern-day scientific thinking and even into the dangerous behaviour we're seeing around COVID. With trust in science low in some corners of western society, people are using unsupported methods for fighting SARS-CoV-2. Despite a lack of evidence, many people have turned to garlic, vitamin D or even bleach to protect themselves.

Vitamin D supplements

Some people used vitamin D to protect themselves from COVID. Sathit/Shutterstock

When you think about it, this kind of reliance on unscientific - or even magical thinking in the case of scientific thinking - the behaviour we've recorded of the Hittites accusing others of sorcery. At least with purification rituals linked with good hygiene - and unlike with drinking bleach - the benefits, in the form of disease prevention, have almost certainly outweighed the costs.

Awareness of these parallels is an important tool for helping people understand that science doesn't have to collide with ritual, and really, that science and ritual are inextricably connected. But we ought to adjust our mismatched rituals in light of science - and to abandon or update those that harm us. Uniting the study of disease with that of culture may help us better understand both.

-ANI

-theconversation.com

Researchers study why moles become melanomas

MOLES and melanomas, which come from the same cell called melanocytes, are similar in nature as they both are skin tumours.

However, moles are harmless while melanomas are cancerous and require treatment or can turn fatal. Robert Judson-Torres, PhD, Huntsman Cancer Institute (HCI) researcher and University of Utah (U of U) assistant professor of dermatology and oncological sciences has explained how common moles and melanomas are and why moles can turn into melanomas. Melanocytes are cells that give colour to the skin to protect it from the sun's rays. Specific changes to the DNA sequence of melanocytes, called BRAF gene mutations, are found in over 75 per cent of moles. The same change is also found in 50 per cent of melanomas and is common in cancers like colon

and lung. It was thought that when melanocytes only have the BRAFV600E mutation the cell stopped dividing, resulting in a mole. When melanocytes had other mutations with BRAFV600E, they divided uncontrollably, turning into melanoma. This model is called "oncogene-induced senescence."

"A number of studies have challenged this model in recent years," said Judson-Torres.

"These studies have provided excellent data to suggest that the oncogene-induced senescence model does not explain mole formation but that they have all lacked in an alternative explanation - which has remained elusive," he added.

With help from collaborators across HCI and the University of California San Francisco, the study team took moles

and melanomas donated by patients and used transcriptomic profiling and digital holographic cytometry. Transcriptomic profiling let researchers determine molecular differences between moles and melanomas. Digital holographic cytometry helped researchers track changes in human cells. "We discovered a new molecular mechanism that explains how moles form, how melanomas form, and why moles sometimes become melanomas," said Judson-Torres.

The study shows melanocytes that turn into melanoma "don't" need to have additional mutations but are actually affected by environmental signalling when cells receive signals from the environment in the skin around them that give them direction. Melanocytes expressed genes in different environments, telling them to either

divide uncontrollably or stop dividing altogether. "Origins of melanoma being dependent on environmental signals give a new outlook in prevention and treatment," said Judson-Torres.

"It also plays a role in trying to combat melanoma by preventing and targeting genetic mutations. We might also be able to combat melanoma by changing the environment," he added.

These findings created a foundation for researching potential melanoma biomarkers, allowing doctors to detect cancerous changes in the blood at earlier stages. The researchers are also interested in using these data to better understand potential topical agents to reduce the risk of melanoma, delay development, or stop recurrence, and detect melanoma earlier.

STRUCTURES

Iconic and eye catching

India Pavilion, representing the country's diverse cultural backgrounds, one of the most visited at Dubai's Expo 2020

THE India Pavilion at EXPO2020 Dubai, which is one of the most-visited pavilions, recording 350,000 visitors in less than 50 days, has also been recognized as 'One of the Most Iconic' pavilion among participating country pavilions by the American Institute of Architects (AIA).

In this remarkable achievement of India at EXPO2020, AIA President Daniel S Hart said, "We are pleased to be a part of India's journey and success at the EXPO2020 and are happy to celebrate the achievement. At AIA, our primary goal is to ensure the safety of the planet with a focus on sustainable practices. The India Pavilion has achieved the same while representing the diverse cultural background of the country. The Pavilion not only showcases the rich history of the country, but also represents the numerous opportunities, possibilities and offers a window into the future. The India Pavilion, since its inauguration on October 1, by Piyush Goyal, Minister of Commerce & Industry, Consumer Affairs, Food & Public Distribution and Textiles, Government of India has hosted several sector and state specific events to highlight India's success and the roadmap of the future. Additionally, the Pavilion has represented India's rich cultural heritage and has organized many cultural events with a unique amalgamation of culture, technology and business opportunities represented by India.

The external facade of the India Pavilion is made of 600 individual colourful blocks and is capable of kinetic movements symbolizing the theme - India on the move. The visitors also get to experience the immersive AI and VR technology at the Pavilion which transports them to a virtual India. While the traditional Indian elements showcase the rich cultural and traditional heritage of our nation, the modern architectural concepts display economic and scientific capabilities of India. The Pavilion is built across a 1.2-acre plot with a state-of-the-



The India Pavilion in Expo 2020 Dubai starting October 1 is set to showcase a resurgent India's march to becoming a USD 5 Trillion economy in the post-COVID world. The Pavilion which is a technology marvel will be open until March 2022.

-hotelernews

art building that will be a permanent structure and will become a part of District 2020. The structure will remain for posterity as part of India's legacy in the UAE. Talking about the uniqueness of the India Pavilion, Dr. Aman Puri, Consul General of India in Dubai said, "We are delighted to see the response towards the India Pavilion and the work done by C. P. Kukreja Architects led by Dikshu Kukreja. We would like to thank AIA for choosing the India Pavilion as one of the most iconic pavilions at EXPO2020 Dubai. We believe the theme of 'Connecting minds, creating a future' has been translated through the pavilion structure."

"As India represents a rich blend of cultures and influences, the same is also represented in our architectural heritage. India is home to 1/6th of the humanity

and is an enormously diverse nation; the India Pavilion beautifully captures this diversity and tells the story of India. Every day, we see thousands of excited visitors who are mesmerized by the interactive nature of the Pavilion. We are looking forward to hosting many such visitors and sustaining the momentum," Dr. Puri added.

On the AIA recognition, Principal Architect of India Pavilion, Dikshu C Kukreja said, "It is a great honour to be recognized by AIA and we are delighted to showcase our country at the Expo. We understand the importance of EXPO2020 Dubai and the Pavilion has been designed to showcase India's diversity, heritage and the numerous opportunities presented by the country on a global pedestal." It has been a pleasure to show the world that India's

architecture has evolved greatly from the ancient monuments and is now at par with the global contemporary architecture. Our primary goal was to show the transformation our country has gone through since independence while keeping in mind the expo themes of sustainability, mobility and connectivity. The kinetic facade, which changes with the Expo themes, has been crucial in showcasing the diversity of our country and interacting with the visitors," he added.

"Thanking AIA for acknowledging India Pavilion as one of the most iconic structure among participating countries, Kukreja said, "Our goal of representing India's cultural and economic growth has been translated into a tangible achievement."

-ANI/NewsVair

By Christopher Flavell

Saving history with sandbags

WASHINGTON — President Warren Harding's blue silk pajamas, Muhammad Ali's boxing gloves, the Star-Spangled Banner, stitched by Peter Ross. Scripts from the television show M*A*S*H.

Nearly 2 million irreplaceable artifacts that tell the American story are housed in the National Museum of American History, part of the Smithsonian Institution, the biggest museum complex in the world. Eleven palatial Smithsonian museums and galleries form a ring around the National Mall, the grand 2-mile park lined with elms that stretches from the Lincoln Memorial to the U.S. Capitol. But that land was once marsh. And as the planet warms, the buildings face two threats. Rising seas will eventually push in water from the tidal Potomac River and submerge parts of the Mall, scientists say. More immediately, increasingly heavy rainstorms threaten the museums and their priceless holdings, particularly since many are stored in basements.

At the American History museum, water is already intruding. It gurgles up through the museum's main entrance, the gap between ground-level windows, puddling around exhibits. It sneaks into the ductwork, then meanders the building and drips onto display cases. It creeps through the ceiling in locked collection rooms, thick

like, and pools on the floor. Staff members have been experimenting with defenses: Candy-red flood barriers lined up outside windows. Sensors that resemble electronic mousetraps, deployed throughout the building that trigger alarms when wet. Plastic bins on wheels, filled with a version of cat litter, to be rushed back and forth to soak up the water. So far, the museum's holdings have escaped damage.

"But 'we're kind of in trial and error,'" said Ryan Doyle, a facilities manager at the Smithsonian. "It's about managing water."

An assessment of the Smithsonian's vulnerabilities, released last month, reveals the scale of the challenge: Not only are artifacts stored in basements in danger, but floods could knock out electrical and ventilation systems in the basements that keep the humidity at the right level to protect priceless art, textiles, documents and specimens on display. Of all its facilities, the Smithsonian ranks American History as the most vulnerable, followed by its next-door neighbor, the National Museum of Natural History.

Scientists at the nonprofit group Climate Central expect some land around the two museums will be underwater at high tide if average global temperatures rise by 1.5 degrees Celsius, compared

with preindustrial levels. The planet has already warmed by 1.1 degrees Celsius and is on track to rise 3 degrees by 2100.

Smithsonian officials want to build floodgates and other defenses and move some collections to a proposed site in suburban Maryland. But Congress has yet to fund many of those efforts, and the changes would take years to implement.

Until then, the Smithsonian struggles with this fact: An institution that is beloved by the public, well-funded and staffed by top experts is protecting the nation's treasures with sandbags and garbage cans. "We follow rain like you wouldn't believe," said Nancy Bechtol, head of facilities for the Smithsonian. "We're constantly watching those weather forecasts to know whether we've got one coming."

"Where We're Standing Could Flood" On a recent morning, a group of employees gathered in the entrance hall of the American History museum to point out the places where the water comes in.

The hall featured a wooden cotton planter used by a South Carolina tenant farmer. Super Surfer skateboard ridden by Patti McGee, the first female professional skateboarder. The cream-colored Fender Esquire that Steve Cropper played when he recorded "Sittin' On The Dock of the Bay" with Otis Redding.

"Definitely, where we're standing could flood," Bechtol said. She fears a massive storm that lingers — the way Hurricane Harvey smothered Houston in 2017, or Ida inundated New York City this past summer. The building manager, Mark Proctor, led the group to Southern Railway 1401, a towering steam locomotive made in 1926. The train sits by a window that looks out onto a garden on the building's east side. In March, a storm flooded the garden. Water came through the window and pooled around 1401's steel wheels. "We had to wet-wax the water out," Proctor said. Outside, staff pushed flood barriers against the windows to slow the water the next time it floods.

Proctor took a freight elevator to the basement, then entered a room that holds electrical and HVAC equipment that forms the building's life-support system. Without it, the air would turn hot and humid, damaging the collections.

Proctor gestured to a wall. "That's where the water was coming into the building," he said, recalling the March storm. Nearby was one of the building's two emergency generators, which Proctor hopes to relocate to the fifth floor. "Your generator's not going to work if it's in the water," he said.

-The New York Times

By Sarah Bahr

Brooklyn Museum receives \$50 m gift from New York

NEW YORK — When Anne Pasternak, the director of the Brooklyn Museum, sat down with Mayor Bill de Blasio in June, she knew that her proposal — millions of dollars in additional funding for the museum — was a big ask.

"I'm really grateful to the mayor and the commissioner of Cultural Affairs," she said. "When I came to them with this very big idea, they actually took the meeting, and they took it seriously."

Her persistence paid off: On Monday, (22) de Blasio will announce that the city's Department of Cultural Affairs will give the museum \$50 million in capital funds, the largest gift in the museum's nearly 200-year history.

"I've been dreaming of this since I joined the museum a little over five years ago," Pasternak said. "Our exhibitions and public programs have been embracing ideas for 21st-century museums, but our building is absolutely mired in the 19th century. So it's time to catch up."

Pasternak said the funding will enable the museum to embark on a new slate of initiatives: modernizing 40,000 square feet of existing gallery space, erecting a permanent gallery devoted to the history of Brooklyn and supporting energy efficiency upgrades in the city-owned landmark building. The fourth- and fifth-

floor galleries for European, decorative and American arts, including Indigenous artworks, as well as design, will all get new interiors and climate control systems. Installations of work from the museum's collection will also be reconsidered as part of the project.

"We hope to be able to significantly expand our contemporary art galleries and design spaces," she said. "We have one of the great American design collections, and absolutely inadequate spaces in which to show it."

Pasternak said the investment will not only allow the museum to showcase more of its permanent collection but also to engage visitors in new ways.

"People are wanting more immersive, participatory experiences in addition to having beautiful galleries with natural light," she said. "You want to be able to have sound; you want to be able to have projection. You want to be able to envelop people in a multitude of ways of telling stories." The Brooklyn Museum is one of the oldest and largest art museums in the United States, the second largest in New York after the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It has a permanent collection of more than 500,000 objects, including one of the finest collections of Egyptian art in the world. In addition to serving as a gallery

space, the museum attracts thousands of younger adults to its monthly free First Saturday events, in which it remains open until 11 p.m. and becomes a kind of dance club, with wine, food and live music (on hold for the moment).

But the institution, which has a large building that is far from Manhattan's Museum Mile, has long struggled financially. It faced pushback from art critics and curators last year when it became the first major U.S. arts organization to take advantage of a two-year window in which the Association of Art Museum Directors allowed institutions hit hard by the economic crisis to de-acquisition, or sell off, work in order to pay for the existing collection's care. The city gives the museum approximately \$9 million each year for operating expenses — or about 20% of its operating budget — approximately \$43 million. The mayor said in a statement Monday that the latest investment "will ensure the Brooklyn Museum remains an iconic destination for generations to come." Pasternak said that while there is no timeline yet for the renovations, many other announcements are to come. "We have dreams for a lot of projects," she said. "We're excited to at last long give Brooklyn the museum it deserves."

-The New York Times



The Brooklyn Museum's skylit Beaux-Arts Court in New York, July 4, 2021. On Monday, Nov. 22, Mayor Bill de Blasio announced that the city's Department of Cultural Affairs will give the Brooklyn Museum \$50 million in capital funds, the largest gift in the museum's nearly 200-year history.

-Harry Swift/The New York Times

By Harumi Ozawa

'Ugly history'

Battle to restore iconic Japan brothel building

AT the corner of a red-light district in the Japanese city of Osaka stands an unlikely architectural gem: a century-old former brothel at the centre of a restoration campaign.

Taiyoshi Hyakuban hasn't functioned as a brothel for decades, and now operates as a restaurant, but it is seen as a symbol of the surrounding neighbourhood, which is still associated with the sex industry.

Experts say the wooden two-storey structure is a rare original example of architecture from the Taisho era of 1912-1926. "Most Japanese architecture dating from a century or more burned down in wartime air raids or big fires," Shinya Hashizume, a professor of architectural history at Osaka Prefecture University, told AFP.

"Old brothel buildings, in particular, have rarely survived," he said on a visit to the site. Taiyoshi Hyakuban has dozens of Japanese and Western-style party rooms, some featuring delicately painted sliding doors and ceilings with ornate inlays.

Murals of festivals, goddesses playing traditional instruments and Dutch merchants in old-fashioned clothes adorn the suites, which surround a garden where towering "yin and yang" rocks represent men and women.

"Here, the art is part of the building... that's what is so wonderful about it," said Masakazu Rokuhara, an architect involved in the restoration project.

At night, swinging red lanterns strung along the outside of the building's second floor lend the structure a nostalgic charm, gently illuminating its red wooden siding.

But daylight reveals the desperate need for restoration, including cracks to a large wooden plaque over the front door and fading paint.

The building was designated a "registered tangible cultural property" in recognition of its historical significance, but that hasn't resulted in any public funds to protect it. And while its owner had long planned to give the building a makeover, the pandemic downturn left funds scarce.

Salacious vice

So a group of local real estate agents and town developers decided to launch a crowdfunding project to raise 15 million yen (\$133,000) to save the struggling structure. "We were concerned the restoration might not even be possible if we waited and let the building continue to deteriorate for another 10 years," said Keisuke Yotsui, a member of the campaign.

Taiyoshi Hyakuban is also something of an emblem for the historic Tobita-Shinchi red-light district, which housed hundreds of brothels a century ago. Many reinvented themselves when prostitution was outlawed in 1957, with customers paying for a room rather than a companion, to skirt legal restrictions.

But the neighbourhood retains a salacious vice, with women sitting at entrances attempting to lure customers.

"Hey, mister! Why don't you stop by?" shouts a tout, as a young woman bathed in a pink spotlight locks eyes with passers-by. And while Taiyoshi Hyakuban has been an upscale Japanese restaurant for decades, its history meant fundraising for its restoration was sometimes tricky.

"We heard from women who told us there was no way they would give money for it," because of the association with the sex industry, Yotsui told AFP. Despite the obstacles, by August, the campaign had raised nearly 19 million yen and restoration has now begun. Hashizume said there was no disguising Taiyoshi Hyakuban's past, but the building was still worthy of saving.

"This district lives with an ugly history," he acknowledged. "But it's also a history of how a neighbourhood has survived despite that legacy," he added. "This piece of architecture is the only original part of the neighbourhood that speaks to that."

-Agence France-Presse

NATURE

By Mitch Smith

Wild Turkeys invade campuses across America

THEY are lounging next to bike racks and outside dorms. They are foraging across Harvard Yard. And, yes, they are occasionally fanning their feathers and charging at innocent students.

Across the nation, from the riverbanks of the University of Minnesota to the forests of the University of California, Santa Cruz, wild turkeys have gone to college. And they seem to like it. Maybe too much.

Once rare in most of the United States, turkeys became one of the great conservation success stories of the past half-century. But as efforts to expand the bird's range flourished across the countryside, the turkeys also trotted into cities, laying down roosts in alleys, parks and backyards, and, increasingly, at institutions of higher learning.

"College campuses are just ideal habitat," said David Drake, a professor and extension wildlife specialist at the University of Wisconsin, where a sizable flock likes to hang out near apartments for graduate students. "The turkeys started intermingling of forested patches with open grassy areas and things like that. Nobody's hunting."

It is a good life for a big bird. At Minnesota, turkeys shopped on tiny berries near the student union this month and strolled down the sidewalk, unfazed as undergrads traipsed past them. Tom Ritzer, the university's assistant director for land care, said a flock of turkeys, also known as a raft, sometimes tore up a planting bed and caused damage. But other times, excessive turkey foraging alerts groundskeepers to a grub infestation.

"It's sort of a blessing and a curse," said Ritzer, a 22-year veteran of the university who has raised hundreds of turkeys started showing up in the past several years. "I guess it's probably better than coyotes."

At many colleges, turkeys have become minor celebrities. Instagram accounts celebrating the birds have loyal followings at Wisconsin, where they've often been photographed on playgrounds and in parking lots, and at Minnesota, where

By Richard Elton Walton

The world's largest organism is slowly being eaten by deer

IN the Wasatch Mountains of the western US on the slopes above a spring-fed lake, there dwells a single giant organism that provides an entire ecosystem on which plants and animals have relied for thousands of years. Found in my home state of Utah, Pando is a 106-acre stand of quaking aspen clones.

Although it looks like a woodland of individual trees with striking white bark and small leaves that flutter in the slightest breeze, Pando (Latin for 'I spread') is actually 47,000 genetically identical stems that arise from an interconnected root network. This single genetic individual weighs around 6,000 tonnes. By mass, it is the largest single organism on Earth.

Aspen trees do tend to form clonal stands elsewhere, but what makes Pando interesting is its enormous size. Most clonal aspen stands in North America are much smaller, with those in western US averaging just 3 acres.

Pando has been around for thousands of years, potentially up to 14,000 years despite most stems only living for about 130 years. Its longevity and remoteness mean a whole ecosystem of 68 plant species and many animals have evolved and been supported under its shade. This entire forest relies on the aspen remaining healthy and upright. But, although Pando is protected by the US National Forest Service and is not in danger of being cut down, it is in danger of disappearing due to several other factors.

Overgrazing by deer and elk is one of the biggest worries. Wolves and cougars once kept their numbers in check, but herds are now much larger because of the loss of these predators. Deer and elk also tend to congregate in Pando as the protection the woodland receives means they are not in danger of being hunted there. As



Jenn Ackerman/The New York Times
Turkeys walk around the University of Minnesota campus in Minneapolis, Nov. 2, 2021. From California to Minnesota to Massachusetts, turkeys have taken a liking to university life, leading to social media stardom and crosswalk confrontations.

one bird was captured peering plaintively through the window of a Buffalo Wild Wings restaurant just off campus. "It's like our campus pet almost," said Amanda Iehl, who, along with classmate Paige Robinson, runs the @turkeysofum Instagram page. Most of the photos they post are submitted by fellow students, but only the best make the cut.

"We have dozens of direct messages of pictures and videos that we haven't posted yet," said Robinson, a sophomore who said she saw turkeys only in zoos when growing up on Long Island and was entranced when they seemed to be turning up everywhere in Minneapolis.

Coexisting with collegiate poultry is not always easy. At California Polytechnic State University, the campus Police Department is occasionally called about turkeys chasing people. At the University of Michigan, a state wildlife officer killed a well-known turkey two years ago that was said to be harassing bikers and joggers.

And at Wisconsin, Drake said at least a couple of aggressive toms were culled after repeatedly frightening students. Even for fans of the turkeys, getting chased can be fearsome.

"There's an element of humor, because, oh, it's a turkey," said Audrey Evans, a doctoral student at Wisconsin who runs @turkeys_of_uw_madison on Instagram. "But your fight-or-flight instinct kicks in."

Whether turkeys prefer campus life to other urban settings is a matter of some debate. Richard Pollack, who keeps an eye on the birds at Harvard, said turkeys regularly hold up traffic in the streets around campus and have been known to peck at the hubcaps of cars. Once, he said, a turkey made its way into an academic building through an open door before strutting back out without incident.

But turkeys seem to be everywhere in Cambridge, Massachusetts, home to Harvard, and Pollack said the birds might be even more ubiquitous off campus.

"I don't know if turkeys are necessarily any more abundant or if they frequent campuses more than they do other areas," said Pollack, the university's senior environmental public health officer. But because of the wide-open areas and heavy foot traffic, he said, "people are more prone to see them" on campus.

They certainly do see them. At Sacramento State, an opinion writer at the student newspaper once wrote a column urging acceptance of the birds. At Fairfield University in Connecticut, where a dormant Twitter account once chronicled the campus rafts, the birds are a point of pride. And at Lane Community College in Oregon, there is an official campus policy on turkeys, namely that "there shall be no intentional or unintentional feeding" of them.

There is little formal study of college turkeys, but on campus after campus, there is widespread agreement that their numbers have exploded in the past decade or so.

Alex Jones, who manages the Campus Natural Reserve at California, Santa Cruz, said he, as a student there in the 1990s, never saw a turkey. Now they are everywhere, sometimes in groups of dozens: outside dining halls, on the branches of redwood trees and, quite often, in streets blocking traffic.

"The funniest thing to me is that they'll take the crosswalk sometimes," Jones said. It makes sense that the turkeys feed at home, Jones said. The Santa Cruz campus includes large wooded areas and grasslands, and it borders state forests. The absence of hunters probably also helps. At Harvard, Pollack said he, too, understands why the birds keep coming back, even though building managers have been known to complain about the prodigious amount of droppings they leave behind. "If I was a turkey, I'd probably find the courtyards and the massive Harvard Yard itself to be a really great place," Pollack said. "Lots of food. Lots of things to see."

-The New York Times



Lance Oditt/IFriends of Pando

Older stems in Pando are also being affected by at least three diseases: sooty bark canker, leaf spot and conk fungal disease. While plant diseases have developed and thrived in aspen stands for millennia, it is unknown what the long-term effect on the ecosystem may be, given that there is a lack of new growth and an ever-growing list of other pressures on the clonal giant.

The fastest-growing threat is that of climate change. Pando arose after the last ice age had passed and has dealt with a largely stable climate ever since. To be sure, it inhabits an alpine region surrounded by desert, meaning it is no stranger to warm temperatures or drought. But climate change threatens the size and lifespan of the trees, as well as the whole ecosystem it hosts. Although no scientific studies have focused specifically on Pando, aspen stands have been struggling with climate change-related pressures, such as reduced water supply and warmer weather earlier in the year, making it harder for trees to form new leaves, which have led to declines in coverage. With more competition for ever-dwindling water resources (the nearby Fish Lake is just out of reach of the tree's root system), temperatures expected to continue soaring to record highs in

summer, and the threat of more intense wildfires, Pando will certainly struggle to adjust to these fast-changing conditions while maintaining its size.

The next 14,000 years
Yet Pando is resilient and has already survived rapid environmental changes, especially when European settlers began inhabiting the area in the 19th century or after the rise of 20th-century recreational activities. It has dealt with disease, wildfire, and grazing before and remains the world's largest scientifically documented organism. Despite every cause for concern, there is hope as scientists are helping us unlock the secrets to Pando's resilience, while conservation groups and the US forest service are working to protect this tree and its associated ecosystem. And a new group called the Friends of Pando aims to make the tree

accessible to virtually everyone through 360 video recordings. Last summer, when I was visiting my family in Utah, I took the chance to visit Pando. I spent two amazing days walking under towering mature stems swaying and "quaking" in the gentle breeze, between the thick new growth in the "bamboo garden", and even into charming meadows that puncture portions of the otherwise-enclosed centre. I marvelled at the wildflowers and other plants thriving under the dappled shade canopy, and I was able to take delight in spotting pollinating insects, birds, fox, beaver and deer, all using some part of the ecosystem created by Pando.

It's these moments that remind us that we have plants, animals and ecosystems worth protecting. In Pando, we get the rare chance to protect all three.

-theconversation.com

Winners of the Nature inFocus Photography and Film Contest 2021

THE Nature inFocus Photography and Film Contest award ceremonies were announced on November 19 and 22, 2021 virtually as live events on YouTube.

Despite the pandemic, the contests have continued to see increasing participation from the world over, says Rohit Varma, one of the founders of Nature inFocus. "The Nature inFocus Photography & Film Contest is more than just a competition. It is about inspiring people to do more with their cameras. To think beyond the ordinary, to make images and films that stand out and can drive action. Even with the pandemic, year on year, we have seen a growth in the number of participants and submissions for the contest. The contest today receives entries not just from India but across the globe. It has become a truly international competition!"

Nature inFocus Photography & Film Contest has been organised by Rohit Varma and Kalyan Varma. After successfully managing multiple rounds over 16 years in companies like AMD, SanDisk and CyberMedia, Rohit hung up his

corporate boots to pursue his passion for photography and wildlife - which led to the creation of Nature inFocus.

Kalyan Varma is an award-winning wildlife photographer, filmmaker, naturalist and explorer specializing in environmental science and ecology in India. He is a freelance with many of the world's leading magazines, environmental NGOs and television networks.

Nature inFocus Photography Contest

The Nature inFocus Photography Contest honours shutterbugs documenting unique natural history moments and critical conservation issues, and generates an impressive catalogue of imaginative and artistic images every year. Submissions for this year's awards closed on June 30 and received about 18,000 images from more than 2000 competing photographers across 40 countries.

Andy Rouse, an award-winning wildlife photographer, who was one of the members of this year's jury, found the whole

experience very fulfilling. "I am a great fan of India and its exceptional biodiversity and was genuinely honoured when asked to judge this competition. And wow, what a great collection of images! It was so good to see the true breadth of the diversity of India's wildlife and the incredible skill with which photographers have executed their photographs. The young photographer section, in particular, was inspiring to see. After all, they are the future of wildlife photography and our planet."

Winners of the Nature inFocus Photography Contest included: Mohammad Murad won the Animal Portraits category, Priyanka Rahut Mitra won the Animal Behaviour category, Prathamesh Ghadekar won the Creative Nature Photography category, Lakshitha Karunaratna won the Widescape & Animals in Habitat category and the Conservation Issues category was won by Mahishan Kon. Anagha Mohan, who is 15 years old, won the Young Photographer title.

Nature inFocus Film Contest

The Nature inFocus Film Contest is a three-category award with a bracket solely dedicated to wildlife footage captured on mobile phones. The contest invited entries from both professional and emerging filmmakers. Both Professional and Emerging Talent categories have two sub-categories in Natural History and Conservation.

Akanksha Sood Singh, one of India's leading natural history filmmakers, a constant on the Nature inFocus jury panel, found the quality of wildlife documentaries being made in India by emerging filmmakers genuinely encouraging. "Over the last 3 years as a jury member for Nature inFocus, I have discovered that there is a lot of passion in young filmmakers to cinematically bring forth the intricacies of the natural world to the common man. They are helping bring the spotlight on lesser known species and habitats, and also exploring their own backyards - which is extremely encouraging." In the Professional category,

New research finds soft food reduces chances of survival for rescued animals

ACCORDING to a new study, feeding too much soft food to the rescued animals might reduce their chances of survival when they are released back into the woods.

This research has been published in the 'Integrative Organismal Biology Journal'. An international team of researchers, led by Dr Rex Mitchell at Flinders University, have shed light on the potentially harmful effects that soft food diets can have on the skull of growing animals.

Each year, thousands of young animals across the world are rescued and rehabilitated by wildlife carers. The aim is to give these animals time to heal and grow until they are fit enough and old enough to be released.

"Some scientists have suggested that captive diets may have unintended, negative effects on skull development that could impact the successful reintroduction of animals into the wild," said Dr Mitchell.

"We wanted to know how much growing up on a diet that doesn't need much biting can impact the ability of an animal to bite effectively in adulthood," Dr Mitchell added.

Fortunately, Dr Mitchell and colleagues had a large collection of computed-tomography (CT) scans collected back in 2012 of rats that were fed different diets, from when they finished suckling all the way to adulthood. Using these scans, Rex created three-dimensional digital models of each rat skull and carried out computer-based 3D bite simulations to see which skulls were the weakest.

Every time a bone is used to perform an action, it bends a little bit. The more often a bone bent over time, the thicker the bone got - especially when moving or lifting heavier things. So the researchers expected less work for food would cause thinner bones to grow in the skull.

The simulations showed that the rats fed the softest diet indeed grew up to have the weakest skulls, but our research also found something unexpected," said Professor Stephen Wroe, co-author from the University of New England in Armidale, Australia.

In some parts of the skull, it wasn't the rats fed the softest diet that was the weakest, but instead the group that was switched from hard to soft food as juveniles.

"This certainly surprised us. So we had to do some digging in the literature to explain it," Rex said.

Interestingly, earlier studies showed that when rats in space experienced sudden and prolonged disuse of bone, the number of cells responsible for depositing more layers decreased.

"We often think of bones as simple hard objects," said Dr Rachel Menegaz, co-author of the study from the University of North Texas Health Science Center where the study was carried out.

"But bones are actually a complex living tissue that is constantly adapting," she added. These results suggested that if an animal suddenly stopped needing to bite its food during development, it might then lose many of the cells needed for depositing bone while it is still growing, impacting on normal bone growth and resulting in a weaker adult skull.

So what does all this mean for the rehabilitation and releasing of our furry friends?

"It's just like for sports and exercise, it's about conditioning the body to be able to better perform the tasks that are expected."

If rescued animals are fed diets that are overly reliant on softer, processed, pre-pelleted, cut, or portioned foods, their skulls and jaw muscles won't be prepared for the more difficult foods they may need to eat in the wild.

-ANI

HORROR FLICKS

By Jason Zinoman

Why the Vampire myth won't die

HAVE you heard that the COVID vaccine turns you into a vampiric monster — and that the proof is right there in the 2007 Will Smith movie "I Am Legend"?

This conspiracy theory appeared online last year and spread so widely that Reuters actually ran a fact check debunking it (and clarifying the plot). One of the screenwriters of the movie also felt compelled to tweet that it was fictional.

While such ludicrous disinformation may seem peculiar to the social media era, it's also a throwback to the origins of our most famous monster.

No, the first vampires did not appear in books or movies. They weren't debaucher Transylvanian counts or good-looking, disaffected teenagers. Rooted in folklore, they were symbols of epidemics — and a plausible explanation for disease, at least for the time.

Some of the earliest accounts date back to 14th- and 12th-century Europe when outbreaks of mysterious, rabid and other diseases were blamed, in part, on vampires.

William of Newburgh, a medieval English historian, recorded one account of a town devastated by such a monster, who was accused of filling "every house with disease and death by his pestiferous breath."

The offending creature, which came out of its grave at night, was eventually dug up and stabbed by two brothers "who had lost their father by this plague," Newburgh wrote. Blood flowed out of the monster as if it were a "leech filled with the blood of many persons"; with the monster defeated, "the pestilence which was rife among the people ceased."

If such scapegoating sounds unlikely, consider life during those medieval times. People would die of disease. Then their loved ones would be exposed to them before they were buried, causing more sickness and death. Because of the incubation period of certain diseases and the ignorance about how microscopic viruses travel, no one could understand the slow-moving catastrophe.

"When people lack science to explain things, they rely on magic and religion," said Stanley Stepanic, an assistant professor of Slavic languages and literature at the University of Virginia who teaches a popular course in "Dracula." "When there was a void in knowledge about disease, the vampire filled in."

These early vampires tended to have bloated mouths, bloated stomachs, bad breath — more like what we now know as zombies. It wasn't until the 19th century, as they became fixtures in weird fiction that vampires were more likely to be wealthy creeps in formalwear.

During this period, the emergence of vaccines became a polarizing subject. The first compulsory vaccination laws were enacted in England, sparking a backlash movement that used the vampire as a metaphor for bodily violation, with fangs representing surgical instruments.

The medium then was pamphlets, not social media. One fearmongering handbill, "The Vaccination Vampire," from 1895, for example, pushed the claim that vaccinations would lead to "degradation and extinction" and were a source of "universal pollution."

"The vampire expressed fears about cutting into and polluting the body," said Media Director and author of the book "Bodily Matters: The Anti-Vaccination Movement in England, 1853-1907," adding that there was real fear vaccinations would disrupt the right balance of humors, those bodily fluids (blood included) that were considered



Vampires night out

gettyimages

very important to one's health back then. And anything that interfered with blood terrified people. The anti-vaccination movement is an important context for "Dracula," Durbach said.

Dracula and His Legacy

When Bram Stoker wrote his culturally transformative novel in 1897, about a Transylvanian nobleman who leaves his castle to travel to modern-day London in search of fresh blood, he certainly knew about vampire folklore as well as the anti-vaccination movement and was working on some of the same fears.

Along with giving Dracula the ability to shapeshift into a bat, he expanded the range of anxieties associated with the vampire, turning it from a symbol of sickness into one of repressed desire. As Stephen King put it in his book "Dance Macabre," "Stoker revitalized the vampire legend largely by writing a novel that fairly pants with sexual energy."

That is not to say the Count was particularly handsome. With hairy palms, arched nostrils and sharp teeth, he was more animalistic than the smooth villain he would later become on screen in Hollywood adaptations.

The first "Dracula," the German expressionist classic "Nosferatu," shot the year after the influenza pandemic ended, is haunted by disease, mass death and even a quarantine in a small town. With his rodentlike teeth, elongated fingers and skeletal silhouette, the terrifying vampire not only looks like a rat, widely known as the deliverer of the Black Plague, but also exits his coffin surrounded by them.

A decade later, Bela Lugosi transformed the image of the vampire from a beast to an alluring European count in the Universal film "Dracula." His voice and haircut remain vampire clichés today, but his glaring intensity and charisma is what really had an impact. The actors who followed him brought even more sensuality

to the role, working on our desires as well as our fears. Seductiveness defined 20th-century vampires, from the glamorous Southern Gothic of Anne Rice novels to the bosomy Victorian world of Hammer Film of the 1960s and '70s. By the next decade, the hot vampire genre merged with the relatable teen comedy in "The Lost Boys," which led to "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" and "Twilight," the commercial apex of domesticated, misunderstood vampires.

Bloodsuckers were no longer monstrous others. Now they were romantic outsiders and even heroes fighting their own natures for the love of others. HBO's "True Blood" radically shifted vampires from wealthy elites of Victorian literature to an oppressed class in the American South, struggling for equal rights (and still having a lot of sex). The tradition of sexy vampires is still alive with the campy new Netflix movie "Night Teeth," set amid the neon-lit nightlife of contemporary Los Angeles. The slick movie involves the breaking of an ancient truce among supernatural monsters, but its main purpose seems to be to set up stylishly bloody action and a scene with Megan Fox and Sydney Sweeney, whose raparts represent a passing of the torch from one generation of sex symbol to another.

Still, while sex has long been a simmering subtext to this monster, the vampire has proved to be remarkably flexible, metaphorically, evolving to reflect acute topical anxieties within the culture.

Amazon's "Black as Night," a vampire story for the Black Lives Matter moment, builds its mythology on a history of white supremacy, with a story of a teenage girl fighting vampires in New Orleans. (Part of a new crop of racially progressive horror, this movie's antecedents include the 1972 "Blacula," about an 18th-century African prince enslaved by Count Dracula on a diplomatic mission to Transylvania designed to curb the slave trade.) The stupendous comedy "What We Do in

the Shadows" is too smart to let any metaphorical meaning get in the way of good jokes. But as its hapless vampires stumble into positions of leadership in the Vampiric Council in the current season, they have become perfect symbols for our broken, ineffectual political system. The core joke of this show is a sendup of the history of glamorous bloodsuckers. By utilizing the same documentary conceit as "The Office" to follow the boring lives of vampires living on Staten Island, this TV series captures an often overlooked truth about eternal life: It gets tedious.

The vampires navigate mundane struggles, play cornhole and suffer from depression. In the most ingenious character of Colin Robinson (Mark Prochok), the show invents a new kind of monster, the energy vampire, who sucks the life out of people by boring them to unconsciousness with terrible jokes and manipulative "Hotel Transylvania" series (the fourth film arrives in January) also works off a demystifying playbook, albeit through the banality of family life.

Many more vampire shows are on the way, including remakes of the 1970s TV series "Salem's Lot," Rice's novel "Interview With the Vampire," and the delicately drawn Swedish movie "Let the Right One In." "The Lost Boys" is also being rebooted.

Vampires are even invading the superhero genre, with Marvel working on another "Blade," starring Chiwetel Ejiofor, and "Morbius," coming in January, in which Jared Leto plays a biochemist trying to cure himself of a blood disease who accidentally infects himself with a form of vampirism.

Boom Times for Bloodsuckers

Whatever political and social fears vampire movies work on, the genre always cycles back to the theme of disease. During the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and early '90s, a virus passed through sexual

encounter or by blood infusion took on new meaning in many vampire stories, and the specter of plague provided a subtext, if not something more overt, in movies like Francis Ford Coppola's "Bram Stoker's Dracula." The most influential vampire novel after "Dracula" is Richard Matheson's 1954 book "I Am Legend," the movie version of which became the subject of those recent anti-vaccination conspiracy theories.

The story focuses on the last man on Earth after a pandemic spreading airborne disease wipes out humanity, replacing some people with vampires. The cause was not a vaccine; it was an attempt to cure cancer, gone wrong.

Shifting the focus from bloodsucking to viral transmission, "I Am Legend" introduced modern apocalyptic horror, with its endless procession of hordes of rampaging monsters. George Romero cited it as the inspiration for his 1968 zombie-changer "Night of the Living Dead," kicking off a new monster tradition of the zombie, which, considering the zombieified style of the original vampires, could be seen as more of a return to form.

One of the most common diseases explored in vampire movies is addiction, a theme of genre highlights including Kathryn Bigelow's debut "Near Dark" and Romero's anti-vampire film "Martin" as well as the new shows streaming.

But more recent movies and shows also seem to be working on COVID-era fears of epidemics.

"Midnight Mass," a portrait of a vampire infestation on a small island town, tells the story of a charismatic newcomer (Hamish Linklater) who takes over as a priest of a sleepy church, quickly drawing crowds to his magnetic sermons, while Jai Rodriguez, bizarre and increasingly bloody events keep happening around him. The violence in this show is brutal, beginning with hundreds of dead cats washing up on the beach, assumed to be the result of illness.

And this season of "American Horror Story," which also opens with some deceased animals, centers on a television writer whose career takes off when he starts drinking blood. The first warning of something being terribly wrong comes from a wonderfully ranting Sarah Paulson, playing a pale, ruffled woman known around town as Tuberculosis Karen. Her hacking cough may trigger COVID anxieties, but her nickname evokes a much older disease, tied to the birth of the myth of the vampire.

To scare audiences, artists must adapt. Fanged Europeans don't terrify like they once did, but contagion does. As societal fears become oriented around the pandemic, what will happen to the future of the vampire? Joe Dante, a veteran horror director, speculated that we have so much more to be unnerved by today than in recent years, both politically and medically, that "it may be difficult to go back to the purely supernatural approach." But Larry Fessenden, who starred and directed in one of the best vampire movies of the 1990s, the intimate New York indie "Hush," sees new opportunities for horror.

"The pandemic has heightened our fear of each other, of infection and contagion, invisible droplets delivering a cataclysmic blow to our physical beings, leading in turn to an atmosphere of deep mistrust and isolation," he wrote in an email. "And always, there will be those who don't believe the monster even exists. I think a wave of vampire stories that captures a claustrophobic preoccupation with death and paranoia may be filling our screens next."

-The New York Times

By Erik Piepenburg

Modern times call for folk horror

IN the new horror film "Antlers," Keri Russell plays a middle school teacher in a struggling Oregon town who speculates that one of her students (played by Jeremy T. Thomas) is hiding a supernatural secret that has something to do with a string of brutal murders. (She's right.)

Scott Cooper, director of "Antlers," had no reservations about showing the film to his daughters, ages 15 and 18, even though there's gore galore in its depiction of a ravened Wendigo, a creature with roots in Native American folkloric traditions.

Rather, he showed it to them because he knew the horrors it depicted — such as opioid addiction and the environmental impacts of mining — would place in comparison to what they're already scared of: the downward spiral of the natural world outside their front door.

"When you live in California, you're constantly in an environment where drought on a daily basis," he said. "They're acutely aware of what it's doing and what their future is. My girls understand that my film is a metaphor."

Humankind's catastrophic relationship to nature and nature's revolt against the dominant belief that the horror story plot devices. They also carry on the tradition of folk horror, a genre with origins largely in British cinema that mainstream American audiences recently

got a taste of in Ari Aster's "Midsommar" and Robert Eggers' "The Witch."

Generally, such films take place in a rural environment and engage with folk customs and ancient belief systems. The stories are mostly about clashes: between insiders and outsiders, city and country, technology and the analog, and modernity and an idyllic past (unless you were a witch). Folk horror wonders if the old ways were right.

As folk horror scholar Adam Scovell wrote, the genre is about "the evil under the soil, the terror in the backwoods of a forgotten lane, and the ghosts that haunt stones and patches of dark, lonely water."

This fall, "Antlers," from the Disney division Searchlight Pictures, joins other new, mostly indie folk horror films from around the world: "The Old Ways," a possession story set in a Mexican village; "Demigod," a supernatural tale set in Germany's Black Forest; "The Medium," about a Thai shaman and a demonic entity; and, opening Nov. 19, the Welsh-language film "The Feast," about a phantasmal dinner party.

Folk horror is the subject of the new documentary "Woodlands Dark and Days Bewitched," a 3-hour-plus deep dive into the history and legacy of the genre. The film, directed by Kier-La Janisse, will be included in a 19-film box set, "All

the Haunts Be Ours," set for release in December by Severin Films. Howard David Ingham, author of "We Don't Go Back: A Watcher's Guide to Folk Horror," said one of the reasons folk horror is so pertinent now is because, whether it's the pandemic or politics, "there's a sense that we're being haunted by a whole lot of unbelieved business."

"Are we scared our neighbor is secretly a witch? Probably not," Ingham wrote in an email. "But it's absolutely a metaphor for what we're experiencing, how the fault lines in our society are manifesting themselves."

Labeling folk horror as a genre didn't take off in earnest until 2010, when it was used in the BBC documentary series "The History of Horror" to describe three British films now call the Unholy Trinity: "Witchfinder General" (1968), starring Vincent Price as an inquisitor; "The Blood on Satan's Claw" (1971), about demonic rituals in 18th-century England; and "The Wicker Man" (1973), about a pagan community on a remote Scottish island. In the 1960s and '70s, American audiences got a feel for the genre in a film such as the H.P. Lovecraft-inspired occult drama "The Dunwich Horror," but also in an absurd exploitation film such as "The Manitou," a tale of demonic body horror, and in experimental cinema, such as "Ganja

& Hess" a Black vampire tale. The folk horror films of this era weren't considered part of a genre; filmmakers were simply using horror to reflect the environmental, racial and spiritual changes around them.

Later, American directors tapped into folk traditions in popular movies such as "Children of the Corn" (1984) and "The Blair Witch Project" (1999). In the past decade, the folk horror label has stuck, and the genre has garnered a devoted following and critical acclaim, thanks to films such as Jayro Bustamante's "La Llorona" and especially the works of Ben Wheatley ("In the Earth").

Although there are rich folk horror cinema traditions around the globe, folk horror films have been mostly made by white men, often about white people's anxieties. A filmmaker who doesn't come from the culture they're exploring, said Janisse, "is going to have to be able to explain how it's suitable for them to make the film in today's climate."

Cooper, who is not Native American, said he was conscious of his status as an outsider, which is why he consulted experts in Wendigo folklore and indigenous histories of the Pacific Northwest to "tell my story without feeling like I was co-opting their legend." For filmmakers working within their own folk traditions, there's nothing scary about creatures or

ancient beliefs because they are baked into their culture. Valdimar Johannsson, director of "Lamb," a new Icelandic film about a couple's animal-child, said Icelanders understand their folk history "as a normal thing and don't consider it to be supernatural or horror."

At Anthology Film Archives, "Folk Horror: A New Genre Emerges," a program, which continues through Nov. 11, includes what may be a surprise: "Get Out." But Jordan Peele's film checks off two foundational folk horror themes: knowledge and landscape in this case, an upper-class white suburb where an island mentality leads to social violence.

In "Get Out," Rapfogel said, "the past is not the past, and things of the past are reappearing in horrific ways."

That's a new idea, Rapfogel said, but folk horror shows no signs of waning. As long as humans mess with Mother Nature and keep regenerating old hatreds, horror will hold up its mirror.

"We might be watching stories of human sacrifice, of ghostly visitations, of witches' sabbats," Ingham said. "But in a dark sense, there's something in a folk horror film that makes us think, 'yes, it's like that.'"

-The New York Times

2nd Test begins at Galle on Monday

Sri Lanka looking for a clean sweep against West Indies

By Neville Anthony

COLOMBO - Sri Lanka take on the West Indies in the 2nd of the two Test series at the Galle International Stadium on Monday (29), looking for a clean sweep, after the convincing win in the first Test.

Played at the same venue, Sri Lanka beat the West Indies by a massive 187 runs, with spin trio Lasith Embuldeniya, Ramesh Mendis and Praveen Jayawickrama proving to be unplayable, leading to the visitors losing wickets cheaply.

Although the experienced pacer Suranga Lakmal and Dushantha Chameera played in the first test, they were given only 18 overs out of the 164.5 overs bowled by Sri Lanka in the whole match.

The spinners, led by Embuldeniya, shared 19 wickets amongst them and are certain to continue as the main spinners in the second Test as well. The selectors have already decided to rest Dushantha Chameera for Monday's game, and may include Chamika Karunaratne or all-rounder Charith Asalanka.

In a bid to strengthen the batting, the selectors might think of debutting Asalanka, as well as Angelo Mathews and skipper Dimuth Karunaratne share the new ball with Suranga Lakmal.

Dimuth, the man of the match in the first Test, speaking ahead of Monday's Test, hinted that an extra batsman could be added to the side. However, the team management will decide the



Lasith Embuldeniya celebrates with team-mates after dismissing Roston Chase Nov 24, 2021 © AFP/Getty Images

final berth between Karunaratne and Asalanka.

Chamika Karunaratne made his test debut against Australia a couple of years back and gave away 148 runs in 26 overs and claimed just one wicket. Since then, he has been drafted into the limited over games where he shines

as an all-rounder. Meanwhile, Angelo Mathews and Dinesh Chandimal will be trying to cement their places in the Test side by putting up better performances in the second Test.

On the other hand the West Indies will be trying to put a better show to draw the series level.

West Indies: Kraigg Brathwaite (capt.), Shai Hope, Nikrunah Bonner, Roston Chase, Kermaine Blackwood, Kyle Mayers, Raheem Cornwall, Jason Holder, Joshua da Silva (wk), 10 Kemar Roach, 11 Jomel Warrican or Jayden Seales. - ENCL

But it won't be easy for them as they lost 6 wickets to the spinners in the 2nd innings of the 1st Test for a mere 18 runs.

Nikrunah Bonner, one of the two batters to score a fifty against the homesters insists his batsmen need smart tactics to beat Sri Lanka's spinners.

If Sri Lanka can win the second Test and the series, they will lead the ICC Test Championship table with a 100% record.

Teams
Sri Lanka: Dimuth Karunaratne (capt.), Pathum Nissanka, Oshada Fernando, Angelo Mathews, Dhananjaya de Silva, Dinesh Chandimal (wk), Charith Asalanka or Chamika Karunaratne, Ramesh Mendis, Lasith Embuldeniya, Suranga Lakmal, Praveen Jayawickrama.

India strike early after setting NZ 284 in first Test

KANPUR, India - India set New Zealand 284 runs to win after a lower order fightback from the Kiwi demolition of the hosts' top batters on the fourth day of the first Test on Sunday.

Ravichandran Ashwin then took the first Black Caps wicket in the day's penultimate over when Will Young fell leg-before for 2 in unfortunate circumstances.

Young, who scored 89 in the first innings Kanpur, failed to review an umpire's call before the clock ran out -- and the Ashwin delivery was missing his stumps.

The final day will resume with Tom Latham on 2, and spinner William Somerville yet to score. Shreyas Iyer -- the first Indian to score a century and a fifty on their debut -- bolstered his side's second innings with 65 after key partnerships with Ashwin and Wriddhiman Saha, who was unbeaten on 61 runs when the hosts declared at 234-7 after tea.

India had started in a commanding position with a 63-run lead at 14-1, after Axar Patel's five-for wrapped up the Black Caps innings at 296 on Saturday.

But New Zealand's Kyle Jamieson and Tim Southee turned the tables with crucial wickets to leave India reeling at 51-5.

Iyer, who scored his maiden Test century in the first innings, helped pull India out of trouble after a 52-run partnership with Ashwin, who left the pitch after chopping a rising Jameson delivery.

Jamieson had triggered the Indian top order collapse with Cheteshwar Pujara's wicket for 22 in the 12th over of the innings.

India then lost stand-in captain Ajinkya Rahane at 41 after he fell leg-before to left-arm spinner Ajaz Patel. Southee returned for an inspired bowling spell and took two wickets in his maiden over.

The veteran pacer first removed opener Mayank Agarwal for 17 after he edged to Tom Latham at second slip.

One ball later, Southee took all-rounder Ravindra Jadeja leg-before for a duck to leave India 51-5. A stubborn lower order performance on an uneven surface saved the hosts further embarrassment as they edged 167-7 at tea.

"The idea was to play session by session," Iyer said. Coach Rahul Dravid "said that I need to stay out in the middle for as much as possible and build on the score," he added. Iyer built a 64-run partnership with Saha before falling to Southee, who took three wickets in his 22 overs for 75 runs.

Saha then played a gritty innings with Axar Patel, unbeaten on 28, to share an unfinished 67-run partnership before the Indian declaration.

Iyer said the hosts had the "spin power" to keep the visitors under pressure for the final day.

Jamieson, who took three wickets in the second innings, also became the fastest Kiwi to 50 wickets in his ninth Test, beating Shane Bond's record by three matches. Patel took another wicket but the other two New Zealand spinners -- Rachin Ravindra and William Somerville -- went wicketless. - AFP

ICC Women's World Cup Qualifier 2021 called off due to new COVID-19 breakout Sri Lanka's hopes of qualifying shattered

DUBAI - The International Cricket Council on Saturday (27) announced that the ICC Women's Cricket World Cup Qualifier 2021 in Harare has been called off due to the introduction of travel restrictions from a number of African countries, including the host country Zimbabwe, following the breakout of a new COVID-19 variant in southern Africa.

Hence, Sri Lanka's hopes of qualifying for next year's Women's World Cup was shattered after winning it's opener against Netherlands by 34 runs on DL method.

The decision to call off the tournament was taken during the preliminary league phase of the nine-

team tournament, that was to decide the final three qualifiers for the ICC Women's Cricket World Cup 2022, to be played in New Zealand, as well as two additional teams for the next cycle of the ICC Women's Championship.

The qualifiers will now be decided according to the team rankings as detailed in the tournament playing conditions. Therefore, Bangladesh, Pakistan and the West Indies will now progress to the event in New Zealand.

Play in two of the three matches scheduled for Saturday - Zimbabwe v Pakistan and USA v Thailand - started as scheduled but the third fixture of the day, between the West Indies and Sri Lanka, could not be staged as a member

of the Sri Lanka team support staff tested positive for COVID-19.

ICC Head of Events Chris Tetley said: "We are incredibly disappointed to have to cancel the remainder of this event but with travel restrictions from a number of African countries being imposed at such short notice there was a serious risk that teams would be unable to return home.

"We have explored a number of options to allow us to complete the event but it isn't feasible and we will fly the teams out of Zimbabwe as soon as possible. Bangladesh, Pakistan and the West Indies will now qualify for the ICC Women's World Cup 2022 by virtue of their rankings, whilst Sri

Lanka and Ireland will also join them in the next cycle of the ICC Women's Championship."

The teams who have qualified for the ICC Women's Cricket World Cup 2022 to be held in New Zealand from 4 March to 3 April are Australia, England, India, South Africa, New Zealand (hosts), Pakistan, West Indies and Bangladesh.

The number of teams in the third cycle of the ICC Women's Championship (from 2022-2025) has been increased from eight to ten, and these teams will be Australia, England, India, South Africa, New Zealand, Pakistan, West Indies, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Ireland. - ICC

Tajjul, Ali shine in even Bangladesh, Pakistan contest

CHITTAGONG - Bangladesh's Tajjul Islam claimed his ninth five-wicket haul while Pakistan's Abid Ali hit a century as the first Test remained delicately poised in Chittagong on Sunday.

The hosts bowled out Pakistan for 286 at the stroke of tea on the third day to take a 44-run lead into the second innings thanks to the mesmerising bowling of Tajjul, who finished with 7-116.

But Pakistan struck back in spectacular fashion with Shaheen Afridi dismissing Shadman Islam (one), Najmul Hossain (zero) and Saif Hasan (18) to finish the day 3-6 and reduce Bangladesh to 39-4 at stumps.

Hasan Ali also scalped the wicket captain Moinul Haque for a duck to rob the hosts of their advantage.

Mushfiqur Rahim remained unbeaten on 12 alongside debutant Yasir Ali, 8 not out.

Ali earlier made 133 off 282 balls, holding one end for Pakistan for a long stretch after Tajjul's early strike of two wickets in two balls in the day's first over.

Fabehem Ashraf added 38 late in the innings to keep Pakistan in contention before he was last man dismissed.

Pakistan, who resumed on 145-0 and looked poised for a big total, suffered an early setback when Tajjul trapped

debutant Abdullah Shaifque leg-before on his fifth ball.

Shafique left without adding to his overnight 52, and Tajjul took Azhar Ali for a duck in the very next ball when the delivery hit him on the foot.

Azhar was initially given not out but the decision was reversed on review.

Babar Azzam saw off the hat-trick ball in Tajjul's next over but did not survive long.

Mehidy uprooted his off-stump with a straight delivery after the Pakistan skipper made only 10 runs.

Tajjul grabbed his third wicket when he beat Fawad Alam with spin to remove the batsman for eight.

Bangladesh sought a review after the umpire turned down a confident caught-behind appeal.

The replay indicated the ball took a feather touch on Alam's glove, ending his brief stay at the crease.

Ali, who struck 12 fours and two sixes, was also lucky to survive after he was dropped at slip by Najmul Hossain off Tajjul at 113.

He was dropped again by Yasir Ali at forward short leg on 133 but it did not cost Bangladesh much, with Tajjul taking him leg before two balls later.

Pakistan had then lost Mohammad Rizwan to Ebadot Hossain, who bowled 2-47. - AFP

England cricket director pleads for 'second chances' in racism scandal

LONDON - England managing director Ashley Giles says cricket has to do much better in tackling racism but pleaded for those who had made "mistakes" to be given a second chance.

English cricket has been rocked by damaging revelations of racism from Pakistan-born former Yorkshire player Azeem Rafiq, who made a number of allegations against high-profile figures in the sport.

One allegation is that former England captain Vaughan told Rafiq and other Yorkshire players of Asian origin that there were "too many of you lot" during a county match.

Vaughan, who has "categorically denied" the allegation, was subsequently left out of the BBC commentary team for the Ashes to avoid a "conflict of interest".

Giles, speaking to British reporters from the team's base in Australia on Sunday, said the England squad had reflected on the Rafiq issue and hearing his story had been "hard to listen to".

The former Test bowler said cricket had to do "much better... discrimination of any form just isn't acceptable" but he also stressed that it was

important to give people second chances.

"For me if zero tolerance means we cut people off, we don't give second chances, we don't give people a chance to rehabilitate then I think we've got a problem," he said.

"We all do make mistakes and we will again but we have to be able to tolerate and educate and rehabilitate, otherwise people aren't going to open up, they're not going to share their experiences."

Giles said many of England's touring party had listened to Rafiq's testimony to British lawmakers about his experiences earlier this month.

"I've been involved in the game over the last 30 years and I'm sure there will be incidents and things I've said that I wouldn't be proud of in a different time and a different context," he said.

"I'm sure cricketers not alone in those experiences but it's clear we need to keep creating environments where people can keep coming forward and sharing those experiences and we can talk about these issues. And to do that we need to educate, we need to share and I also think we need to tolerate." - AFP

Farcical match in Portugal abandoned

LISBON - Belenenses' Portuguese top-flight match against Benfica was abandoned early in the second half because the home side had only six players on the pitch - having been forced to start the game with nine men, including a goalkeeper as an outfield player.

A Covid outbreak had left Belenenses with 17 players unavailable and their nine men were already 7-0 down at half-time.

And, after a delayed break, the team, third from bottom emerged with just seven players due to injuries before a further injury immediately after the restart left them with only six - resulting in an immediate abandonment.

A dark chapter for Portuguese football - Rui Costa

Benfica president Rui Costa said his side were "forced" to play, adding the two bodies who could have postponed the game, the league and the Directorate-General for Health, did not do so.

"I regret what happened today, a

dark chapter for Portuguese football and for the country itself," he said.

Manchester City's Portuguese midfielder Bernardo Silva wrote on Twitter earlier in the match: "What is this? Am I the only one who doesn't understand why the game hasn't been postponed?"

Sporting Lisbon, third in the table behind Benfica, released a statement saying: "Portuguese football as a whole is seriously harmed today."

"What is happening has serious implications for the credibility of this championship and the institutions that regulate it."

They added: "What made this situation possible must deserve a deep reflection by all those who defend the sporting truth and must deserve national attention at the highest level."

"It is already receiving international attention and marking yet another dark episode in Portuguese football."

Belenenses, who had to field goalkeeper Joao Monteiro in defence, got off to the worst possible start, scoring an own goal within the first

minute. Such was their dominance with the two-man advantage, Benfica averaged 85% possession.

The own goal from Brazilian defender Eduardo Kau plus two goals from Haris Seferovic, one from Julian Weigl and a Darwin Nunez hat-trick had ended any semblance of a contest by the break.

What is happening has serious implications for the credibility of this championship and the institutions that regulate it."

The match was called off a minute into the second period as Monteiro dropped to the floor, forcing the referee to abandon the game because the minimum number of players - seven - were not on the field.

The Belenenses players released a joint statement before match that read: "Football only has heart if it is competitive. Football only has heart if it is really sporting."

"Football only has heart when it is an example of public health. Today, football lost its heart." - BBC