

Coronavirus

Kits donated by UAE

US warned Nevada not to use China-made test

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates, Oct 15, (AP): US diplomats and security officials privately warned the state of Nevada not to use Chinese-made coronavirus test kits donated by the United Arab Emirates over concerns about patient privacy, test accuracy and Chinese government involvement, documents obtained by The Associated Press show.

The documents illustrate how the US government actively - if quietly - tried to keep the state out of a project involving the Chinese firm BGI Group, which is the world's largest genetic sequencing company and which has expanded its reach during the coronavirus pandemic.

US intelligence agencies have warned that foreign powers like China could exploit samples to discover the medical history, illnesses or genetic traits of test takers, though they have not offered any public evidence. Internal emails and documents obtained by the AP from the Nevada governor's office through a public records request show US authorities expressing such concerns specifically about BGI.

"I hope the Nevada COVID-19 task force leadership is aware of this so they can make an educated decision and know some of the US Government's concerns," William Puff, a Homeland Security regional attaché at the US Embassy in Abu Dhabi, wrote in an email forwarded to Nevada officials.

The warnings from the Department of Homeland Security and the State Department led the office of Nevada Gov. Steve Sisolak in April to direct a Nevada hospital not to use any of the donated 250,000 test kits as officials turned down an offered laboratory deal.

Geopolitics could play a role in the U.S. warning. President Donald Trump and his administration have been locked in a trade war with China and also have actively lobbied its allies not to use telecommunication equipment from Chinese firm Huawei, for instance, citing security concerns.

The donation offer to Nevada also involved a shadowy Emirati company called Group 42, which partnered with Shenzhen-based BGI to create a rapid-testing system in the United Arab Emirates. G42 and government officials in the UAE did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

Response

In response to queries from the AP, BGI said in an email that G42 made the donation to Nevada on its own without BGI's knowledge and that BGI never had direct contact with the state. BGI's COVID-19 tests have approval from the US Food and Drug Administration for use on an emergency basis and are used in some labs in the United States - but "BGI has no access to either patient samples or patient data," it said.

"BGI Group takes all aspects of patient data protection, privacy and ethics extremely seriously, and is committed to full compliance with all applicable regulations in the countries in which it operates," the company said.

G42 and BGI partnered to create a similar lab in Abu Dhabi in March, part of a mass testing campaign in the Emirates that has conducted over 11 million tests in a nation of 9 million people.

The UAE proposed building a similar lab in Nevada that would rapidly process samples from polymerase chain reaction, or PCR, tests. Those genetic tests, using long cotton swabs that collect samples from deep inside a person's nose and throat, can detect an active case of the coronavirus.

The unusual offer from the UAE came amid a nationwide shortage of test collection kits in the US.

In an email sent to Nevada officials on April 20, Puff, the Homeland Security attaché, alleged without offering evidence that G42s coronavirus tests were "closer to 60% accurate" rather than the 90% claimed by the firm. BGI long has maintained its PCR tests have "high accuracy," though factors like "the sampling process, storage and transportation of samples" can affect results.

Puff also raised concerns about the potential risks of Americans sharing their medical samples with BGI.

"The embassy has concerns with G42's relationship with the Chinese government and BGI, and patient privacy concerns," Puff wrote. "The guidance we received from the U.S. Department of State is we should decline testing from G42."

The Nevada governor's office quickly responded on the same day to the warnings of Puff and other U.S. officials. Michelle White, the Nevada governor's chief of staff, wrote in an email that they "highly recommend that you discontinue these tests and any usage of testing equipment immediately."

Sisolak's office did not respond to phone and email messages from the AP seeking comment.

Scott Kerbs, a spokesman for Nevada's University Medical Center, which received the G42 supplies, told the AP that while UMC used 20,000 specimen collection kits offered by G42, the 250,000 kits donated were never used only as they were incompatible with its system.

The US National Counterintelligence and Security Center has warned state health officials about "potential threats posed by foreign powers in connection with COVID tests." That's even as the US Food and Drug Administration has approved Chinese tests from BGI and others for use on an emergency basis.

The US Embassy in Abu Dhabi quietly declined an offer by the Emirati government months earlier to conduct free coronavirus testing of its diplomats over its concerns about Chinese involvement. It did not publicize that information either to the estimated 75,000 Americans living in the Emirates.

Responding to questions from the AP, the State Department declined to offer any details about its discussions with the Emirati government. The UAE insists all genetic data is being kept private and is not shared with BGI.

"The Department shares information with private US citizens abroad regarding safety and security threats that might affect them," the State Department said. "In this case, the Department did not deem the use of BGI COVID-19 tests to be a threat to safety."

Also:

**SEOUL, South Korea:** South Korea has reported 110 new cases of the coronavirus, half of them linked to a hospital in Busan.

The numbers released by the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency on Thursday brought the national caseload to 24,988, including 439 deaths.

At least 54 infections were reported in a hospital for the elderly in the southern port city of Busan.

More than 40 others came from the densely populated Seoul metropolitan area, tied to places including hospitals, churches, schools and offices.

The steady rise in infections is a cause of concern in a country that has just lowered its social distancing measures, allowing high-risk venues like nightclubs and karaoke bars to reopen and spectators to return to professional sports.

Health officials are planning to test 160,000 employees at hospitals, nursing homes and welfare centers for senior citizens in Seoul and nearby areas as part of efforts to prevent outbreaks.

**Hong Kong and Singapore** say they have agreed to a bilateral air travel bubble, re-establishing travel links as coronavirus infections in both cities decline. Under the agreement, travelers from Hong Kong and Singapore will not be restricted on their travel purposes, Hong Kong commerce minister Edward Yau said Thursday. This means that tourists from each city will be able to visit the other. Both Hong Kong and Singapore closed their borders earlier this year, banning short-term visitors from entering as they fought to reduce coronavirus infections. Under the air travel bubble, travelers will also not be subject to compulsory quarantine, provided they have taken coronavirus tests mutually recognized by both cities, with a negative test result. Additionally, travelers are required to fly on dedicated flights which will only serve air travel bubble travelers between Hong Kong and Singapore.



Pharmacist Ali Lahib, (left), administers a flu shot to Bernard Mathonet in a drugstore, Oct14, in Paris. France launched a flu vaccine campaign Tuesday in an effort to avoid facing another epidemic peak as the coronavirus is spreading rapidly in the country. (AP)

Does the flu vaccine affect my chances of getting COVID-19?

Does the flu vaccine affect my chances of getting COVID-19?

The flu vaccine protects you from seasonal influenza, not the coronavirus - but avoiding the flu is especially important this year.

Health officials and medical groups are urging people to get either the flu shot or nasal spray, so that doctors and hospitals don't face the extra strain of having to treat influenza in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic.

Not to mention the confusion factor: The illnesses have such similar early symptoms that people who get the flu may mistakenly think they have COVID-19, said Dr. Gregory Poland, an infectious disease specialist at Mayo Clinic. Only a test can tell the two apart.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends the flu vaccine for everyone starting at 6 months of age, and suggests getting it by

the end of October. The CDC says the vaccine will not cause you to fall ill with the flu, and that the protection it provides takes about two weeks to kick in. And the flu vaccine isn't perfect but studies show if the vaccinated get sick, they don't get as severely ill.

A few flawed studies over the years have attempted to link the flu vaccine to increased risk of other respiratory infections, but experts say there is no evidence that's true. (AP)



In this handout photo released by Roscosmos Space Agency, NASA's Kate Rubins, (center), Sergey Ryzhikov and Sergey Kud-Sverchikov, top, of the Russian space agency wave before enter the Soyuz MS-17 for their trip to the International Space Station (ISS), at the Russian leased Baikonur cosmodrome, Kazakhstan, Wednesday, Oct. 14. A trio of space travelers has launched successfully to the International Space Station, for the first time using a fast-track maneuver to reach the orbiting outpost in just three hours. (AP)

Discovery

**Cells at zoo lead to cloning:** Little Kurt looks like any other baby horse as he frolics playfully in his pen. He isn't afraid to kick or head-butt an intruder who gets in his way and, when he's hungry, dashes over to his mother for milk.

But 2-month-old Kurt differs from every other baby horse of his kind in one distinct way: He's a clone.

The rare, endangered Przewalski's horse was created from cells taken from a stallion that had sat frozen at the San Diego Zoo for 40 years before they were fused with an egg from a domestic horse.

With the egg's nucleus removed, ensuring Kurt would be basically all Przewalski's horse, they were implanted in the mare who would become his mom on Aug 6.

The result, officials say, was the world's first cloned Przewalski's horse.

Scientists have cloned nearly two dozen kinds of mammals, including dogs, cats, pigs, cows and polo ponies. In 2018, researchers in China created monkeys for the first time using the cloning techniques that produced Dolly the sheep.

The zoo sees Kurt's birth as a milestone in efforts to restore the population of the horse also known as the Asiatic Wild Horse or Mongolian Wild Horse. The small, stocky animals (they stand only about 4 to 5 feet tall at the withers) are believed extinct in the wild and number only about 2,000 in zoos and wildlife habitats. Their limited gene pool puts them at a reproductive disadvantage.

"This colt is expected to be one of the most genetically important individuals of his species," Bob Wiese, chief life sciences officer at San Diego Zoo Global, which operates the zoo, said in a statement.

Kurt was named for Kurt Benirschke, who played a key role in founding the Frozen Zoo with its extensive research program and cell cultures. (AP)

**Museum to return remains:** A Berlin museum is set to return to Australia three sets of human remains, including a pair of child mummies, which officials believe were removed from burial sites against the wishes of Indigenous communities.

The Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, an authority that oversees many

Coronavirus

Extra safety scrutiny planned

Virus vaccine fears growing

Russia approves 'second virus' vaccine after early-stage trials

NEW YORK, Oct 15, (AP): Facing public skepticism about rushed COVID-19 vaccines, US health officials are planning extra scrutiny of the first people vaccinated when shots become available - an added safety layer experts call vital.

A new poll suggests those vaccine fears are growing. With this week's pause of a second major vaccine study because of an unexplained illness - and repeated tweets from President Donald Trump that raise the specter of politics overriding science - a quarter of Americans say they won't get vaccinated. That's a slight increase from 1 in 5 in May.

The poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found only 46% of Americans want a COVID-19 vaccine and another 29% are unsure.

More striking, while Black Americans have been especially hard-hit by COVID-19, just 22% say they plan to get vaccinated compared with 48% of white Americans, the AP-NORC poll found.

Concerned

"I am very concerned about hesitancy regarding COVID vaccine," said Dr. William Schaffner, a vaccine specialist at Vanderbilt University who says even the primary care doctors who'll need to recommend vaccinations have questions.

"If the politicians would stand back and let the scientific process work, I think we'd all be better off," he added.

The stakes are high: Shunning a COVID-19 shot could derail efforts to end the pandemic - while any surprise safety problems after one hits the market could reverberate into distrust of other routine vaccines.

On top of rigorous final testing in tens of thousands of people, any COVID-19 vaccines cleared for widespread use will get additional safety evaluation as they're rolled out. Among plans from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Texting early vaccine recipients to check how they're feeling, daily for the first week and then weekly out to six weeks.

Any vaccine before Election Day is extremely unlikely. Over Trump's objections, the Food and Drug Administration issued clear safety and effectiveness standards that shots must meet -- and Commissioner Stephen Hahn insists career scientists, not politicians, will decide each possible vaccine's fate only after all the evidence is debated at a public meeting.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the top US infectious diseases expert, says that

MOSCOW, Oct 15, (AP): Russian authorities have given regulatory approval to a second coronavirus vaccine after early-stage studies, two months after a similar move prompted widespread criticism from scientists both at home and abroad.

Russian President Vladimir Putin made the announcement on Wednesday, during a televised meeting with government officials.

"We now need to increase production of the first vaccine and the second vaccine," Putin said, adding that the priority was to supply the Russian market with the vaccines.

The peptide-based, two-shot vaccine, EpiVacCorona, was developed by the Vector Institute in Siberia and tested among 100 volunteers in early-stage, placebo-controlled human trials, which lasted more than two months and were completed two weeks ago. The volunteers were between 18 and 60 years old.

The scientists have yet to publish the results of the study. In comments to the media, scientists developing the vaccine said that it produced enough antibodies to protect the person who had it from the virus and that the immunity it creates could last for up to six months.

An advanced study involving

tens of thousands of volunteers that is necessary to establish safety and effectiveness of the vaccine was scheduled to start in November or December.

Deputy Prime Minister Tatyana Golikova, who said earlier this week she took part in the early trials as a volunteer, said Wednesday that 40,000 people will take part in the advance studies of EpiVacCorona. It remained unclear whether the vaccine would be offered for a wider use while the trials are still ongoing.

Russia's first vaccine, Sputnik V, was developed by the Moscow-based Gamaleya Institute and approved by the government on Aug. 11, after early trials among 76 volunteers were completed. Just like on Wednesday, Putin personally broke the news on national television and said one of his daughters had already been vaccinated, experienced slight side effects and developed antibodies.

As Russia boasted about being the first in the world to approve a vaccine, experts said that in line with established scientific protocol, much broader studies among tens of thousands of people were needed to ensure the safety and effectiveness of the vaccine before it is given widely.

should be reassuring because it means scientists like himself will see all the evidence.

"So the chances of there being secret hanky-panky are almost zero, because everything is going to be transparent," he told The AP.

Here are some things to watch as vaccines get closer to the finish line.

Developed

Furthest along in final-stage testing in the US are a vaccine candidate made by Pfizer Inc. and Germany's BioNTech, and another developed by Moderna Inc. and the National Institutes of Health.

Fauci says "the best bet" is that data about whether one or both work will emerge sometime in November or December.

How soon depends on an independent Data Safety and Monitoring Board -- the only group that can peek at the data before the study's finished.

of Berlin's museums, said that its trustees agreed to a request made by the Australian government in February to repatriate the remains - a set of human bones in a bark coffin, as well as the two mummified children's bodies - from the German capital's Ethnological Museum.

The remains arrived at the German museum in 1880.

"The ancestral remains of all three persons come from burial sites," herit-



Benirschke



Parzinger

age foundation president Hermann Parzinger said in a statement. "We presume that they were collected and removed against the wishes of the Indigenous communities affected. Therefore we wish to return them."

"We are pleased to be able to take this step toward righting the historical injustice that brought them to Berlin," Ethnological Museum director Lars-Christian Koch said. (AP)