

Biden officials consider phasing out rule that blocked migrants during pandemic

WASHINGTON — The Biden administration is in the later stages of planning how to phase out a Trump-era public health rule that has allowed border agents to quickly turn away most migrants who have arrived at the southern border during the pandemic, according to two administration officials. It is possible that in the coming weeks, border officials could start allowing migrant families back into the country, with an eye toward lifting the rule for single adults this summer.

The rule, which will not final, is sure to complicate an already thorny issue for President Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris, who is visiting the border on Friday as Republicans accuse the administration of being slow to address what they describe as an unending surge of migrants trying to enter the country. Lifting the rule will only exacerbate that.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, border agents have turned away migrants shortly after 350,000 times under the public health rule, known as Title 42, which immigration and human rights advocates call unenforced and cruel, particularly for those seeking asylum. Migrant families have been turned away more than 100,000 times since the rule was put in place in March 2020, according to government data.

The White House has deflected questions about how long the rule will remain in place, saying it is up to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which issued the policy. An agency spokesman referred questions about the rule to the White House.

Mr. Biden, who has promised a more humane approach to migration enforcement, decided not to continue the Trump administration's policy of expelling children who arrived alone at the border. Single adults and many families, however, have continued to be turned away because of the public health rule, whose stated purpose is to prevent the coronavirus from spreading at points of entry or border patrol stations. Still, some migrant families have been allowed into the United States because Mexico or their home



A group of migrants, including children and adults, walking along a dirt path in a rural area.

condition of asylum seekers because they were not authorized to do so. Advocates reported cases of the deaths.

For migrant families, the officials said, one idea under consideration is to put them seeking asylum into one of immigration and Customs Enforcement's alternatives to detention. That includes having them wear ankle bracelets as their request makes its way through the immigration courts, a process that can take years because of a chronic backlog of cases. The administration has already been doing this for other migrant families this year.

NYTimes

First COVID-19 case could have emerged in China in Oct 2019: Study

The virus that causes COVID-19 could have started spreading in China as early as October 2019, two months before the first case was identified in the central city of Wuhan, a new study showed on Friday.

Researchers from Britain's University of Kent used methods from conservation science to estimate that SARS-CoV-2 first appeared from early October to mid-November 2019, according to a paper published in the PLOS Pathogens journal.

The most likely date for the virus's emergence was Nov. 17, 2019, and it has probably already spread globally by January 2020, they estimated.

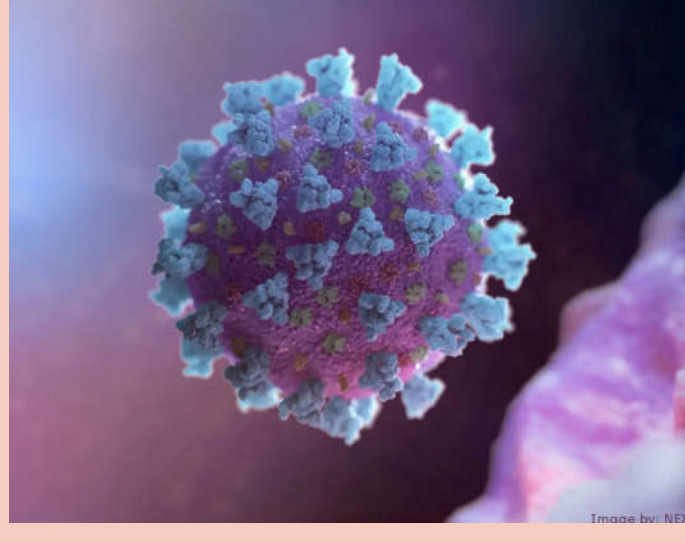
China's first official COVID-19 case was in December 2019 and was linked to Wuhan's Huanan seafood market.

However, some early cases had no known connection with Huanan, implying the SARS-CoV-2 was already circulating before it reached the market.

A joint study published by China and the World Health Organization at the end of March acknowledged there could have been sporadic human infections before the Wuhan outbreak.

In a paper released in preprint form this week, Jose Billon of the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle reviewed genetic sequencing data from cases of COVID-19 cases in China.

The data showed that samples taken from the Huanan market were "not representative" of SARS-CoV-2 in the whole and were a variant of a progenitor sequence circulating earlier, which spread to



COVID-19 virus particles, which spread to

other parts of China.

The US National Institutes of Health confirmed in January that the samples used in the study were submitted to the Sequence Read Archive (SRA) in March 2020 and later deleted at the request of Chinese investigators, who said they would be updated and submitted to another archive.

Critics said the deletion was further evidence that China was trying to cover up the origins of COVID-19.

"Why would scientists sit in international databases to delete key data that informs us about how COVID-19 began in Wuhan?" said Alex Chen, a researcher with Harvard's Broad Institute, writing on Twitter.

Another study by Australian scientists, published on Thursday in the Scientific Reports journal, used genetic data to show SARS-

CoV-2 samples were already adapted to humans when it first emerged. It said it was possible there was another unidentified animal with even stronger affinity that served as an intermediary species, but the hypothesis that it had been from the lab could not be ruled out.

"Which is clear early on, we had a high propensity for human infection, that doesn't mean they were man-made," said Dominic Dwyer, infectious disease expert at Australia's Western Hospital who was part of the WHO team investigating COVID-19 in Wuhan this year.

"Such conclusions remain open questions," he said.

Seven samples still needed to be tested to make a stronger case about COVID-19's origins, said Stuart Telford, associate professor at the Kirby Institute, an Australian medical research organization.

Human trials on the COVID-19 vaccine began in late December and about 25,000 volunteers received jabs as part of its third phase of trials that recently concluded.

The vaccine received a emergency authorization earlier this month and is expected to be rolled out on a large scale in the coming weeks.

Several powerful organizations under the vaccine leader that has said it now produces three million doses per month and will soon boost production to 11 million doses a month to become the

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Russia summons UK envoy to 'protest' warship incident

Russia's foreign ministry on Thursday summoned the British ambassador to "strongly protest" what it said was a British destroyer's violation of its territory.

The spot between Moscow and London erupted Wednesday after the HMS Defender passed near Crimea in the Black Sea, with Russia saying it fired warning shots at the destroyer to ward it off Britain denied the claim.

Russia accused Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 and claims the waters around the peninsula as part of its territory.

Most countries including Britain did not recognize the takeover and stood behind Ukraine's claims to the waters.

In a statement Thursday, the Russian foreign ministry said it had summoned UK ambassador Deborah Houston and issued a "strong protest" over the British vessel's violation of Russia's territory and its "provocative and dangerous actions."

In the event of a repetition of such provocations, all responsibilities for the further possible consequences will rest entirely on the British side," the statement added.

The destroyer, HMS Defender, was in the Black Sea, near the Russian border, when it was fired upon by a Russian missile boat. The British ship was on its way to the Black Sea, near the Russian border, when it was fired upon by a Russian missile boat.

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Lebanon caretaker PM approves financing fuel imports at weaker exchange rate

Lebanon's caretaker prime minister on Friday approved a proposal to finance fuel imports at the rate of 1,500 Lebanese pounds to the dollar, instead of the previous 1,500 pound rate, amid worsening gasoline shortages.

The weaker exchange rate, which will effectively decrease the subsidy on fuel, is expected to raise the price of gasoline for consumers but enable the government to supply fuel for a longer period of time.

Lebanon is in the throes of a financial crisis described by the World Bank as one of the deepest depressions of modern history. Fuel shortages in past weeks have forced motorists to queue for hours for dribbles of gasoline.

Lebanon's subsidy program, introduced last year as the country's economic meltdown threatened to hinder living conditions, covers basic goods such as wheat, medicine and fuel and costs around \$6 billion a year.

Half of that amount is spent on fuel.

Lebanon's central bank asked the government on Thursday to provide a with a high price to fund a foreign currency from its mandatory reserves to fund the subsidized fuel imports, an indication that the bank has all but run out of reserves.

Mandatory reserves - hard currency deposited by local banks at the central bank - represent a percentage of customer deposits and are usually not drawn upon except in exceptional circumstances, with the correct legal permission.

Canada: At least 600 graves found at Indigenous boarding school

The graves at Marieval were administered by the Roman Catholic Church, Delorme said. Over the years, and stories from Indigenous elders and historians say they will find more at other sites.

Chief Justice Delorme of the Cowessess First Nation in Saskatchewan said they had found at least 600 graves after radar detected 751 "flat" in a field on the school grounds.

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