Australia denies using 'plants' to undermine China's Covid vaccine rollout in Pacific

The Australian government has denied undermining China's plan to roll out Covid vaccines to Pacific countries after Beijing lashed Canberra's purported "callous" and "irresponsible behaviour".

The allegation, first aired in Chinese state-controlled media and then amplified by the foreign ministry in Beijing, was "absolutely not" true, the Australian government said on Tuesday.

The spat is the latest flashpoint in the deteriorating relationship between China and Australia amid intense competition for influence in the Pacific region.

The Global Times, a Chinese state-run newspaper, said it had "learned exclusively from sources that Australia has been racking its brain to undermine China's vaccine cooperation with Pacific Island countries" and had "planted several 'consultants' in the national epidemic prevention center in Papua New Guinea".

The paper accused Australia of "working in the shadows" to delay the authorisation of the emergency use of Chinese vaccines in PNG and of "threatening senior officials from welcoming Chinese vaccines".

The Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson, Wang Wenbin, called on the Australian government to "stop disrupting and undermining vaccine cooperation between China and Pacific island countries".

"Those in Australia who take advantage of vaccine issues to engage in political manipulation and bullying coercion are being callous to the life and health of the people in PNG," Wang told reporters on Monday, in response to a question from CCTV, another state-controlled broadcaster.

But the Australian minister for international development and the Pacific, Zed Seselja, told the ABC the claim Canberra was interfering was "absolutely not the case" and "rejected by the Australian government".

"My message to people who may have read that, or other articles, would simply be to look at Australia's record during this period, and over a long period of time, of providing high-quality healthcare support and providing vaccine support," Seselja said.

Seselja arrived in PNG on Sunday for a trip aimed at strengthening "cooperation on health security and infrastructure". He met with the prime minister, James Marape, in Port Moresby on Monday.

In an interview with the ABC's PNG correspondent, Natalie Whiting, Seselja said the Australian government was "fulfilling our moral and economic responsibility" to the region.

"We come to these issues in good faith, and we'll continue to do things that are in the interests of our region and in the interest of our friends and neighbours, most particularly PNG," Seselja said.

The Australian government announced on Tuesday it was planning to allocate up to 15m doses of Covid-19 vaccines to the Pacific and Timor-Leste, saying it would help "our closest partners" to "achieve comprehensive vaccine coverage".

The allocation comes from the 20m doses that Scott Morrison pledged to the broader Indo-Pacific region when he attended the G7 summit last month, although the deadline for delivery is mid-2022.

"Australia has already shared more than half a million vaccine doses with our Pacific and Timor-Leste partners since March," Seselja and the foreign affairs minister, Marise Payne, said in a statement.

Marape said in March PNG was also "working closely with the Chinese government" and "once the vaccines from China are cleared by the medical board then we will bring that in as well".

Australian government officials have previously raised concerns that China's vaccine diplomacy could come with "strings attached", saying it "wouldn't be surprising if there were conditions attached in some instances".

But Wang hit back at that idea on Monday, saying China was doing its utmost "to help developing countries save more innocent lives". "We have no geopolitical agenda and attach no political strings," he said.

The latest dispute is part of a broader rift between China and Australia over diplomatic, trade and security issues.

Beijing announced last month that it was launching a formal challenge against Australian tariffs on several Chinese products.

That follows Australia's own twin challenges at the World Trade Organization against Beijing's imposition of tariffs on Australian barley and wine.

China has blocked ministerial-level talks for at least the past year, amid a souring of the relationship over a range of issues including Australia's early public calls for an international investigation into the origins of the coronavirus and its criticism of China over the crackdown on dissent in Hong Kong and human rights abuses in Xinjiang.

theguardian

Bangladesh PM sends 300 kg haribhanga mangoes to tripura chief minister

Dhaka: Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has sent 300 kilograms of Haribhanga mangoes as a gift to Tripura Chief Minister Biplab Kumar Deb, said Bangladesh Assistant High Commissioner in Agartala on Monday.

On Monday, Bangladesh Assistant High Commissioner, Agartala, presented the gift of mangoes to Biplab Deb on behalf of Sheikh Hasina.

"The Assistant High Commissioner handed over 300 KGs of Haribhanga mangoes sent from the Prime Minister of Bangladesh for the Chief Minister of Tripura to the latter at his office this afternoon. CM cordially thanked the Prime Minister for the gift," Bangladesh Assistant High Commissioner in Agartala, Tripura wrote in a tweet.

Bangladesh Prime Minister has also sent 2,600 kgs of mangoes as gifts to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee.

The Haribhanga variety of Mangoes were transported through the land border via the Benapole checkpoint. According to local media reports, the shipment arrived at the Benapole-Petrapole check post on the India-Bangladesh border last Sunday.

Reportedly, PM Hasina has sent mangoes for President Ram Nath Kovind also.

The Haribhanga variety of mango is grown in Bangladesh's Rangpur district. ndtv

Afghanistan to top agenda as Indian...

From P1

The visit will happen at a time that the Taliban has taken some districts, especially in northern Afghanistan that shares a border with Central Asian countries, something that has creates concerns in Russia as well as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Reuters reported that Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon on Monday ordered the mobilization of 20,000 military reservists to bolster the border with Afghanistan. Reports indicate that more than 1,000 Afghan security personnel fled across the border in response to Taliban advances.

On Sunday, President Ghani in a phone conversation with his Tajik counterpart Emomali Rahmon discussed issues pertaining to "Afghan citizens' seeking sanctuary at Tajik border areas after facing Taliban attacks."

Tajik President Emomali Rahmon expressed concern over the conditions caused as a result of the conflict, the Presidential Palace said.

According to a Presidential Palace statement, President Ghani appreciated Tajikistan's showing goodwill to the displaced Afghans and said the Afghan government "will adopt immediate measures to address their needs."

The Kabul Times

Japan to ship millions more COVID-19 vaccines to Taiwan, Asian neighbours this week

TOKYO: Japan said on Tuesday it would ship millions more doses of AstraZeneca Plc's (AZN.L) COVID-19 vaccine to Asian neighbours this week as a continuation of bilateral donations.

Japan will send about 1.1 million more doses to Taiwan on Thursday, Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi told reporters at a regular press conference, after previously delivering 1.24 million doses last month. read more

A further 1 million doses each will be sent to Thailand, the Philippines, and Vietnam this week, following earlier donations to Indonesia and Malaysia, Motegi said.

"True friends always lend a hand when they need each other the most," Taiwanese Premier Su Tseng-chang wrote on his Facebook page. Japan has arranged to buy 120 million doses of AstraZeneca's vaccine, with most of that supply produced by domestic companies. Regulators approved the shot in May, but amid lingering concerns about blood clots, health authorities have relied on the mRNA-type vaccines made by Pfizer Inc (PFE.N) and Moderna Inc (MRNA.O) in Japan's inoculation push.

Japan has pledged $1 billion and 30 million doses to the global vaccine sharing scheme COVAX, but so far its donations have been outside of that programme. read more

AstraZeneca doses produced in Japan have not yet been approved by the World Health Organisation for use in COVAX, Motegi said, so the country has turned to bilateral deals to respond to "urgent requests for vaccine supplies."

Japan's first shipments through the COVAX facility are expected in the middle of this month, with some 11 million doses bound for nations in south Asia and the Pacific islands, Motegi said.reuters

Tropical Storm Elsa makes landfall in Cuba, eyes Florida

This GOES-16 GeoColor satellite image taken Monday, July 5, 2021, at 4:50 p.m. EDT, and provided by NOAA, shows Tropical Storm Elsa over western Cuba with strong rain and winds.

Heavy rain from the storm will hit Cuba and the Cayman Islands through Monday night, which the National Hurricane Center warned could cause significant mudslides in Cuba.

Two deaths were reported in the Dominican Republic and one in St. Lucia from the storm, which had been a Category 1 hurricane, and Cuba had evacuated 180,000 people by Sunday, The Associated Press reported. However, the worst of the tropical storm missed Havana and it was mainly affecting rural areas with sustained winds of 50 mph.

The storm is expected to batter Central and Western Cuba overnight before it continues to parts of the Florida Keys and Florida's Gulf Coast Tuesday and Wednesday.

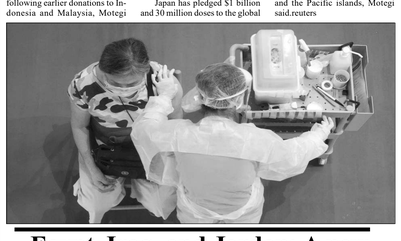
The National Weather Service (NWS) issued a Tropical Storm Warning up to the Ochlockonee River and a Storm Surge Warning from Bonita Beach to the Aucilla River.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis warned in a tweet on Sunday that "All Floridians should prepare for the possibility of heavy rain, flooding and potential power outages."

"Now is the time to restock your supplies and review your hurricane plan," he added.

NWS meteorologists have predicted Elsa will turn east over Northern Florida, and they advised parts of the coast along Georgia and the Carolinas could also face tropical storm conditions on Wednesday and Thursday.

foxnews



Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan: A new partnership 30 years in the making?

In April, the news that Iraq was mediating between longtime rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran captivated Middle East watchers. Iraq's new role as a Saudi-Iran intermediary comes as the Saudis have taken concrete steps in recent years to build a meaningful relationship with their northern neighbor, such as reopening their border last November for the first time since 1990. Yet while the new Saudi-Iraq relationship is indeed noteworthy, Iraq has simultaneously been forging a regional partnership with two other Arab states: Egypt and Jordan. Indeed, Baghdad hosted a summit in late June attended by Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi and King Abdullah II of Jordan. It was the fourth time leaders of the three countries have met together since March 2019, and the first time on Iraqi soil. It was also the first visit by an Egyptian president to Iraq in more than 30 years.

At first glance, a partnership grouping together Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan appears rather strange. One commentator, not without reason, called it an alliance composed of the "

region's odd fellows." However, Iraq has historically had important economic relationships with both Egypt and Jordan, and in fact the three countries — along with North Yemen — came together in a very short-lived partnership called the Arab Cooperation Council (ACC) from 1989 to 1990. Today, like 30 years ago, economic cooperation lies at the heart of the trilateral relationship. But then and now it has also had strategic goals. And in the longer term, the new partnership potentially heralds a far more ambitious project to bring together not just Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan, but the countries of the Levant more broadly.

Back to the Future

Iraq's close economic ties to Egypt and Jordan date to the 1980s, during the Iran-Iraq War. Jordan became Iraq's economic lifeline at that time, serving as a conduit for imports and oil exports through the port of Aqaba. Jordan also received most of its own oil, highly subsidized, from Iraq. King Hussein was Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's closest ally at the time, visiting Baghdad often during the war. Egypt, meanwhile, saw more than

one million of its citizens relocate to Iraq during the 1980s to fill jobs made vacant by the mass conscription of Iraqi men into the armed forces — so many that Iraq constituted Egypt's largest source of remittances.

Soon after the end of the war, the three countries, joined by North Yemen, formed the ACC. Each had a political motive to forge the pact. All wanted allies to balance against the Gulf Cooperation Council, the Saudi-led alliance of the six Gulf monarchies created during the war. Saddam owed the Saudis billions of dollars in loans from the war, while Amman and Sana'a had longstanding concerns about Saudi expansionism and interference in their internal affairs.

brookings