

# Message sent: Canada minister arranges virus airlift by text

AFP | Ottawa

Canada's foreign minister used his thumbs to arrange an emergency airlift of weary Canadians from Peru during the pandemic, reaching out to his counterpart by text message to secure landing rights, he said Thursday.

It was part of what Foreign Minister Francois-Philippe Champagne described in an interview with AFP as "the largest repatriation of Canadian travellers abroad in Canada's history."

According to his office, some 8,000 Canadians so far have been brought home from more than 30 countries on over 40 government flights since the World Health Organization declared a pandemic last month.

In numbers and complexity, the task he described was enormous, overcoming airport closure after airport closure, restrictions on flights and the movement of people, and in extreme cases situations where



Canadians queuing outside their consulate in Lima, Peru on March 26. Some 8,000 Canadians have been returned home over virus fears in the country's largest repatriation ever

martial law had been declared.

"You know, basically, I had to negotiate the landing slots for our planes to land in Peru, I did that by text message, to be honest," he said.

"I said to my counterpart in Peru that we need to get our planes there and we started ex-

changing texts, so I got the dates and then I got the hours (for the flights) because now every plane that is leaving Peru has to leave from one military airport in Lima."

"This is by far the most challenging repatriation exercise that we have ever done."

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Champagne also said he has been reaching out weekly to a "subgroup of G20 countries" to share lessons learned about the new coronavirus and how to slow its spread, "to advocate for airbridges that we had during the World War, to advocate for supply chains to remain open, for allowing transit and the repatriation of our citizens."

"Many of my colleagues were facing the same challenges with respect to their repatriations," he said.

"So in a world like that, Canada has been trying to express some leadership and trying to bring together people who don't normally work together."

## Could TB vaccine protect medics from COVID-19?

Paris

Could a common vaccine used for decades to protect against tuberculosis help shield health workers from COVID-19?

While developing a specific immunisation against the coronavirus sweeping the planet will likely take many months, researchers are studying the potential benefits of the BCG shot, which many people around the world receive as children.

Laboratories and pharmaceutical firms are racing to find medicines to tackle COVID-19, which has infected more than a million people, killed at least 50,000 and for which there is currently no known treatment, vaccine or cure.

They are also looking at repurposing existing drugs.

### Experts remain cautious

"We have known for decades that BCG has non-specific beneficial effects", in that it protects against diseases other than the one for which it was created, Camille Locht, of the French public health research institute Inserm, said.

Children vaccinated with BCG suffer less from other respiratory illnesses, it is used to treat certain bladder cancers and it could protect against asthma and autoimmune diseases such as type 1 diabetes.

Researchers want to test whether the tuberculosis vaccine could have a similar effect against the new coronavirus, either by reducing the risk of



Researchers are testing whether the tuberculosis vaccine could either reduce the risk of being infected by the coronavirus, or limit the severity of the symptoms

being infected, or by limiting the severity of the symptoms.

In France, where the BCG vaccine was compulsory until 2007, "most of the study participants will have already had a first vaccination", but the protective effect of this decreases over time, said Locht.

But experts remain cautious on the potential of the BCG to provide protection.

### 'Military exercise in peacetime'

"That is exactly the reason for this research," says Mihai Netea, professor of experimental internal medicine at Radboud University in the Netherlands, which recently announced a clinical trial, with the University of Utrecht involving hundreds of healthcare workers.

This will see 500 medical pro-

fessionals receive the BCG jab and 500 get a placebo.

This is a relatively new concept based on the discovery that our innate immune response -- the body's generalised defences -- also has a memory, alongside the acquired immunity, which develops antibodies after coming into contact with a specific pathogen.

The BCG vaccine does not directly protect against the coronavirus, but provides a boost to the immune system which may lead to improved protection and a milder infection, Radboud university said of the study.

The idea is that the innate immune system can be prepared, or "trained" to better combat attacks, thanks in particular to live attenuated vaccines, such as BCG or measles, which contained a weakened sliver of the original pathogen.

In the case of COVID-19, in addition to infection by the virus itself, some patients have also suffered excessive immune responses, with the uncontrolled production of pro-inflammatory proteins, cytokines.

"Vaccination, in particular against BCG, might help to better orchestrate this inflammatory immune response," said Laurent Lagrost, Inserm research director who works on links between inflammation and the immune system.

The vaccine acts as a "military exercise in peacetime" so that the body can "fight the enemy effectively in wartime," he said in an interview this week with French broadcaster BFMTV.

### International effort

A separate trial of the BCG vaccine has also been launched in Australia, with some 4,000 health workers, by the Murdoch Children's Research Institute.

Microbiologist Locht wants to harmonise the criteria of the French study with that planned in four Spanish hospitals, in order to better compare their results.

However, researchers in Spain, instead of using the BCG, would like to try a new tuberculosis vaccine developed by the biotech firm Biofabri.

This vaccine candidate, whose safety has already been demonstrated, should offer "better protection", said Carlos Martin, professor of microbiology at the University of Zaragoza, because it is "developed from a strain isolated in humans".

In contrast, he said the BCG is prepared from a strain of the bacteria that infects cattle, and two genes very important to the virulence of tuberculosis have been deactivated in the vaccine candidate.

Another advantage of the new vaccine is that it is made in Europe and could be quickly made available, while the BCG suffers from strong supply tensions and using it for adults against COVID-19 could deprive children of it in countries where tuberculosis remains endemic.

In Germany, the Max Planck Institute for Infectious Biology is also preparing a trial with a genetically-modified vaccine candidate, developed by the Serum Institute of India.

In coordination with these countries, Inserm announced on Thursday that clinical trials could also be launched in Africa, where health systems are expected to come under acute pressure from the coronavirus pandemic.

## Latest developments

**Thailand will begin enforcing a six-hour curfew from Friday night** in a bid to control the spread of coronavirus, and has warned anyone who breaches the order faces a two-year jail term. The curfew runs from 10 pm to 4 am (1500 to 2100 GMT), and bars everyone in the country from leaving their homes, except for workers in essential services.

**Prime Minister Narendra Modi called on Indians to hold candles and mobiles aloft for nine minutes on Sunday** in order to dispel the "darkness and uncertainty" of the coronavirus crisis. "Friends, amidst the darkness spread by the Corona pandemic, we must continuously progress towards light and hope," Modi said in an address to the nation of 1.3 billion people under a lockdown since March 25.



**Japan shifted its focus more to coronavirus patients** with severe symptoms, asking those who are less ill to stay home or at accommodation designated by local authorities, as specialised beds run short with the outbreak spreading fast. Health minister Katsunobu Kato said his ministry issued the instruction to all prefectures, including hard-hit Tokyo.



A policeman wears a coronavirus-themed outfit at a market in Chennai, India to raise awareness about social distancing

**Australia's corporate watchdog threatened real estate agents with fines and jail time if they tell financially struggling tenants to withdraw money from their retirement accounts to pay their rent during the COVID-19 crisis.** The Australian Securities and Investments Commission said in a letter to professional real estate bodies that it had "significant concern" over reports that agents were pressuring tenants unable to pay their rent due to the economic impact of the pandemic to use their retirement savings.

**Rights activists on Friday condemned Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen's government for executing a convicted murderer,** saying the continued use of capital punishment undermined the island's progressive reputation. Death row inmate Weng Jen-hsien, found guilty last year of setting a fire that killed his parents and four relatives in 2016, was executed by a firing squad on Wednesday, the justice ministry said.



**The UK government said yesterday it was rushing to build more emergency field hospitals** ahead of an expected surge in coronavirus cases, hours after recording a record 569 deaths from the disease. Two new facilities will be built in Bristol in the west and Harrogate in the north to house up to 1,500 patients, the state-run National Health Service (NHS) said in a statement.

Tunisia's interior ministry has deployed a police robot to patrol the streets of the capital and enforce a lockdown imposed last month as the country battles the spread of coronavirus. Known as PGuard, the 'robocop' is remotely operated and equipped with infrared and thermal imaging cameras, in addition to a sound and light alarm system.



**Troops and police in Ecuador have collected at least 150 bodies** from streets and homes in the country's most populous city Guayaquil amid warnings that as many as 3,500 people could die of the coronavirus in the city and surrounding province in the coming months.

**British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said on Friday he was remaining in isolation with mild symptoms of the coronavirus,** including a high temperature, seven days after he first tested positive. "Although I'm feeling better and I've done my seven days of isolation, alas I still have one of the symptoms, a minor symptom, I still have a temperature," Johnson said in a video message posted on Twitter.



**Britain's Prince Charles opened a new hospital in London yesterday.** The Nightingale Hospital, which will initially provide up to 500 beds equipped with ventilators and oxygen, will eventually be able to treat about 4,000 patients. It has been created in the Excel Exhibition Centre in London's Docklands.

Italy's civil protection chief said the country's lockdown would probably continue beyond the start of May.

Spain's daily deaths fell for the first time since March 26, a day after its total casualties exceeded 10,000.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel ended her self-quarantine and returned to the chancellery after testing negative several times.

Russia will send 11 military planes carrying medical equipment to Serbia.

The U.S. government on Friday sounded the alarm about the surge in coronavirus cases in Japan, adding to a chorus of prominent domestic voices - including the governor of Tokyo - who have called for decisive action to avoid an explosive outbreak.

**India will pull out of a three-week lockdown in phases, as officials battle to contain the country's biggest cluster of infections in New Delhi.**

Indonesia's death toll passed South Korea as the country with the highest number of recorded fatalities in Asia after China

Kyrgyzstan reported its first death

Israel enforced a lockdown of an ultra-Orthodox Jewish town badly affected by the virus.



Laboratories and pharmaceutical firms are racing to find medicines to tackle COVID-19