

US's Azar says any US vaccine would be shared once US needs met



US Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar is seen on a screen as he speaks during a news conference in Taipei, Taiwan

Reuters | Taipei

US Health Secretary Alex Azar said on Monday that any US vaccine or treatment for COVID-19 would be shared fairly with the rest of the world, once the US need has been satisfied.

There are more than 200 COVID-19 vaccine candidates in development around the world, including more than 20 in human clinical trials. US President Donald Trump has vowed to have a shot ready before year's end, though they typically take several years to develop and test for safety and effectiveness.

"Our first priority of course is to develop and produce enough quantity of safe and effective FDA-approved vaccines and therapeutics for use in the United States," Azar told reporters while on a visit to Taiwan.

"But we anticipate having capacity that, once those needs are satisfied, those products would be available in the world community according to fair and equitable distributions that we would consult in the international community on." He did not elaborate.

Azar also said that the United States' decision to leave the World Health Organization (WHO) did not mean less international involvement for his country in global public health.

"The United States has always been and will remain the largest funder of global public health in the world," he added.

"After our departure from the WHO, we will work with others in the world community to find the appropriate vehicles for continuing to support, on a multilateral and bilateral basis, global public health on the order that the United States has done in the past."

Johnson fears loss of UK's power and magic if Scotland breaks away



Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson gestures as he visits St Joseph's Catholic School, as the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak continues, in Upminster, London

Reuters | London

Prime Minister Boris Johnson warned yesterday that Britain would be weaker if the union that binds its four nations were broken - his latest rejection of a growing push for Scottish independence.

Disagreements between Britain's constituent nations - Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England - over the handling of the coronavirus pandemic have damaged relations already badly strained by Brexit.

That is particularly the case in Scotland, which voted against leaving the European Union and where opinion polls show support for independence narrowly outweighs support for its 300-year union with England. "The union of

the United Kingdom is, for me, it's the greatest political partnership the world has ever seen," Johnson told broadcasters, when asked what the union meant to him.

"It would be such a shame to lose the power, the magic of that union."

Scotland voted 55 percent to 45 percent against independence in a 2014 referendum, but the Scottish National Party which runs the semi-autonomous nation wants another vote. Although voters there backed staying in the EU, Britain as a whole voted to leave.

Johnson's Conservative Party, which governs all of Britain and decides policy in areas that have not been devolved to Scotland, is a strong supporter of the union and dismisses any call for another vote.

Afghan peace talks in days as prisoner release approved

AFP News

Afghan peace talks are expected to begin within days after authorities announced Monday they would soon start releasing hundreds of Taliban prisoners accused of brutal attacks including on foreigners.

The fate of some 400 Taliban prisoners has been a crucial hurdle in launching much-delayed talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government, who had committed to completing a prisoner exchange before negotiations could start.

Thousands of prominent Afghans on Sunday approved their release at the end of a three-day "loya jirga" -- a traditional Afghan gathering of tribal elders and other stakeholders sometimes held to decide on controversial issues.

"Our stance is clear, if the prisoner release is completed, then we are ready for the intra-Afghan talks within a week," Taliban spokesman Suhail Shaheen told AFP.

Shaheen said the first round of talks would be held in Doha,



The Afghan government has already released almost 5,000 Taliban inmates

400

The fate of some 400 Taliban prisoners has been a crucial hurdle in launching much-delayed talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government

Qatar. "The Afghan government will start releasing the 400 Taliban prisoners within two days," National Security Council spokesman Javid Faisal told AFP on Monday.

The prisoner exchange was a key part of a deal signed by the Taliban and the United States in February, which saw Washington agree to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan in return for

a pledge from the insurgents to hold peace talks with the Kabul government.

The Taliban were ousted from power in 2001 by a US-led invasion which has been followed by nearly two decades of fighting that has killed tens of thousands of people. US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad tweeted that "a historic opportunity for peace is now possible".

Brutal attacks

The Afghan government has released almost 5,000 Taliban inmates already, but authorities had balked at freeing the final 400 prisoners demanded by the militants.

The prisoners are accused of serious offences including killing scores of Afghans and foreigners, with 44 insurgents of particular concern to the United States and other countries for their role in "high-profile" attacks.

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said he had

lobbied for a former Afghan army soldier, who went rogue and killed three Australian colleagues, to stay in jail.

The accused, who is among the 400 to be freed, has been in prison for seven years.

"Our position is that he should never be released. We do not believe that his release adds to peace in this region," Morrison said Monday.

The family of French aid worker Bettina Goislar, who was murdered in Afghanistan in 2003, said they would not accept the release of her kill-

ers, who are on the list.

"Such a decision to free (them) made on the basis of horse-trading would be, to us, her family, inconceivable," her family told AFP.

In its final resolution, the jirga said it had approved releasing the militants "to remove the hurdles for the start of peace talks, stopping bloodshed, and for the good of the public".

The jirga urged the government to monitor the freed prisoners to ensure they did not return to the battlefield and

demanding an immediate and lasting ceasefire in the country.

But the Taliban said the ceasefire should form part of the agenda during the negotiations with the Afghan government.

Not all those who attended the jirga favoured the release of militants.

Lawmaker Belquis Roshan, a prominent women's rights activist, had protested against their release on the first day of the jirga, unfurling a banner that read: "Redeeming Taliban is national treason."

Gas explosion destroys Baltimore homes

● One woman was killed, four people were hospitalized in serious condition

Reuters

A gas explosion tore through a Baltimore neighborhood yesterday, killing at least one person, injuring four and trapping children as the blast destroyed at least three homes, firefighters and media said.

The Baltimore Sun said it was a natural gas explosion, citing fire officials, but said the exact cause remained unknown.

The blast destroyed three brick row homes and ripped open the wall of another, spreading debris throughout the neighborhood as rescuers picked through a pile of rubble, searching for victims, news pictures showed.

One woman was killed, four people were hospitalized in serious condition, and firefighters were trying to rescue a sixth person, the Baltimore City Fire Department said on Twitter.

At one point at least five peo-



Police officers help a woman at the scene of an explosion in a residential area of Baltimore, Maryland

ple were trapped, some of them children, the Baltimore Firefighters IAFF Local 734 said on Twitter.

Neighbours responding to the blast dug through rubble and called out for victims, one man told WBAL television.

"It was just chaos," Dean Jones told the NBC affiliate, saying he ran barefoot to the scene where he found destroyed homes and broken-out win-

dows, and smelled gas.

"We were just worried about just trying to get people out. Once they said a kid was in there, I lost it. I said I had to get in there now," he said. "I am not a hero, I'm a human."

One neighbor who happens to be a building inspector told the Baltimore Sun he could hear shouts from trapped children.

"Come get us! We're stuck!" came the cries, Kevin Matthews,

a US Occupational Safety and Health Administration building inspector who lives on the block, told the Sun.

Matthews found one person buried from the neck down and another sheltering in a closet, the Sun said.

People felt the blast miles away and neighbors said their windows were blown out and doors blasted off the hinges, the Sun reported.