

News in brief

Moderna starts trial for Omicron-specific booster shot



◆ Moderna said on Wednesday it had started a mid-stage study, testing a booster dose of its COVID-19 vaccine specifically designed to target the Omicron coronavirus variant, a day after rival Pfizer Inc launched a similar trial. The company said while a third shot of its original coronavirus vaccine increased neutralizing antibodies against the variant at the lower dose, their levels declined six months after the booster dose was administered.

◆ European nations pushed back Wednesday against the Malian military government's demands that newly arrived Danish special forces fighting jihadists immediately withdraw from the Sahel state. Task Force Takuba brings together special forces from European countries to advise Malian troops and assist them in combat, with roughly 90 Danes joining earlier this month.

EU urges Mali to reconsider troop withdrawal demand



Four people shot dead in British Columbia home, homicide probe launched



◆ Four people were found shot dead on Wednesday in a house in the Vancouver suburb of Richmond, and Canadian police launched a homicide probe. The identities of the victims were not released but they were believed to have known each other, local police said. Investigators said initial evidence showed it was "a targeted shooting" in a normally quiet neighborhood, but police do not believe the homicides were connected to gang violence in the region.

◆ Jordanian soldiers killed 27 smugglers as they tried to cross the border from Syria with large quantities of amphetamines during a snowstorm, an army spokesman said yesterday. Others also carrying drugs fled back into Syria during the attempt, one of an increasing number of such incidents over the past year that had led the army to toughen its rules of engagement with smugglers. The army has also found large quantities of drugs - mostly commonly an amphetamine known as Captagon - hidden in Syrian trucks passing through Jordan's main border crossing to the Gulf region.

Jordan's army says 27 drug smugglers killed at border with Syria



Magnitude 6.2 earthquake strikes Pangai, Tonga

◆ A magnitude 6.2 earthquake struck about 219 km (136.1 miles) west-northwest of Pangai, Tonga, yesterday, the United States Geological Survey (USGS) said. The earthquake was at a depth of 14.5 km, the USGS said.

UK PM Johnson refuses to resign over lockdown parties

Reuters | London

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson rejected opposition calls to resign for attending lockdown parties but accepted that a rule that ministers should lose their jobs if they had knowingly misled parliament applied to him.

Johnson, who in 2019 won the biggest Conservative majority in more than 30 years, is braced for the publication of an official investigation into claims that there were multiple boozy Downing Street parties during lockdowns. He told parliament no rules were broken.

It was not immediately clear when the results of that investigation by Cabinet Office official Sue Gray would be published, especially as police have opened their own investigation. Asked by the opposition Labour Party Keir Starmer leader if the ministerial code, which says that ministers who had knowingly misled parliament should offer to resign, ap-



British Prime Minister Boris Johnson walks outside Downing Street in London

plied to him Johnson said: "Of course."

"If he'd misled parliament, he must resign," Starmer told parliament. "Will you now resign?" "No," Johnson replied.

He said he could not speak about investigations into the alleged parties. Johnson said his government was focused on driving economic growth and leading the Western response to the Ukraine crisis.

Johnson has given a variety of explanations about the parties: first he said no rules had been broken but then he apologised to the British people for the apparent hypocrisy of such gatherings.

He has denied an allegation he was warned that a "bring your own booze" lockdown gathering on May 20, 2020, which he says he thought was a work event, was inappropriate.

ITV reported on Monday that Johnson and his now wife Carrie had attended a surprise party of up to 30 people for his birthday in the Cabinet Room at Downing Street in June 2020, when indoor gatherings were banned.

Party culture

British police on Tuesday

said they had opened their own investigation into lockdown events at Downing Street, upping the pressure on Johnson.

Some of his lawmakers have already demanded he resign but to trigger a leadership challenge, 54 of the 359 Conservative MPs in parliament must write letters of no confidence to the chairman of the party's 1922 Committee.

The number of letters submitted is kept secret until the threshold of 54 is reached.

British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss, tipped as a possible future prime minister if Johnson is toppled, said Downing Street had not yet been given the findings of the Gray report but that it would come out very soon.

Asked about the claims that Johnson and his staff had partied at the heart of the British state while ordinary people were banned from even bidding farewell to their dying relatives in person, Truss said some of the reports were concerning.

"There clearly needs to be a change in culture," Truss told the BBC. "We need to get the results of the report, we need to look at the results and fix the issues there are."

YOU KNOW WHAT

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North as US

Pyongyang steps up w engagement strategy

● Sixth missile test this month by North Korea

● North Korea defends tests as measure for self-defence

AFP | Seoul

North Korea fired two suspected ballistic missiles yesterday, Seoul said, its sixth weapons test this month in one of the most intense spates of launches on record that has delivered an emphatic rejection of Washington's offers for talks on its nuclear programme.

Pyongyang has not fired this many missiles in a calendar month in decades, according to data compiled by the Center for Strategic and International Studies -- a Washington-based think tank.

The last time they came close was in 2019, after high-profile negotiations between leader Kim Jong Un and then-United States president Donald Trump collapsed.

With US talks stalled since then, Pyongyang has doubled down on Kim's pledges of military modernisation, embarking on a string of sanctions-busting launches this month, including hypersonic missiles.

The sabre-rattling comes at a delicate time in the region, with Kim's sole major ally China host-

COVID-19: Countries worst affected

Country	Total cases	Total deaths
1 USA	74,194,630	899,007
2 India	40,371,500	491,729
3 Brazil	24,553,950	624,507
4 France	17,730,556	129,747
5 UK	16,245,474	155,040
6 Russia	11,404,617	328,770
7 Turkey	11,167,927	86,487
8 Italy	10,539,601	145,159
9 Spain	9,660,208	92,767
10 Germany	9,270,732	117,968
11 Argentina	8,130,023	120,019
12 Iran	6,293,695	132,333
13 Colombia	5,798,799	133,019
14 Mexico	4,779,296	304,308

Global tally

364,743,041

Deaths

5,649,535

Recovered:

288,489,203

New cases

+1,683,794

New deaths

+4,421

Figures as of closing

Middle East

Country	Total cases	new cases	Total deaths	New Deaths	Total recovered	Active cases
Egypt	415,468		22,460		349,427	43,581
Saudi Arabia	670,997	+4,738	8,929	+2	622,087	39,981
UAE	835,839	+2,638	2,232	+4	772,723	60,884
Kuwait	521,341	+6,515	2,490	+1	469,916	48,935
Oman	330,767	+2,441	4,134	+1	308,825	17,808
Qatar	332,800	+1,952	640	+2	301,289	30,871

Dozens of guns among Los Angeles train loot: police

AFP | Los Angeles

Dozens of guns have been stolen from freight trains that have been looted in Los Angeles, the city's police chief has said.

Images of the detritus left behind by thieves who break into stationary wagons in the middle of the second biggest city in the United States swept around the world this month.

Now the city's top policeman has said that the bandits got away with more than just Amazon packages.

"People were... breaking into these containers and stealing firearms, tens of firearms," Michael Moore told the Police Commission this week.

"That gave us great concern as a source again of further violence in the city."

An AFP team filmed thousands of gutted boxes on the stretch of tracks near the city center, many from major retailers like Target, and being shipped by carriers including UPS and FedEx.

The thieves wait until the long freight trains stop on the tracks and break the locks with bolt cutters.



A Union Pacific freight train passes along a section of tracks littered with debris from packages stolen from cargo containers stacked on rail cars

anything that moves around the country from or to retailers.

And, the police now say, guns. Firearms purchased online in the United States cannot legally be shipped to the customer, but can be sent instead to a licensed dealer for pick-up.

Since December 2020, rail operator Union Pacific (UP), whose convoys are being targeted, has seen a 160 percent increase in thefts in Los Angeles County.

"In October 2021 alone, the increase reaches 356 percent compared to October 2020," the operator said in a letter to local authorities seen by AFP.

They then help themselves to parcels, ditching anything too difficult to sell.

The haul could include an-

SpaceX rocket

AFP | Washington

A chunk of a SpaceX rocket that blasted off seven years ago and was abandoned in space after completing its mission will crash into the Moon in March, experts say.

The rocket was deployed in 2015 to put into orbit a NASA satellite called the Deep Space Climate Observatory (DSCOVR).

Since then, the second stage of the rocket, or booster, has been floating in what mathematicians call a chaotic orbit, astronomer Bill Gray told AFP Wednesday.

It was Gray who calculated the space junk's new collision course with the Moon.

The booster passed quite close to the Moon in January in a rendezvous that altered its orbit, said Gray.

He is behind Project Pluto, software that allows for calculating the trajectory of asteroids and other objects in space and is used in NASA-financed space observation programs.

A week after the rocket stage whizzed close to the Moon, Gray observed it again and concluded it would crash into the Moon's dark side on March 4 at more than