

# *The Hindu & BL Editorials 10<sup>th</sup> July 2020*

## *For BANK, SSC, MBA & Others*

### **1.ICMR's August 15 deadline for launch of Covid-19 vaccine does not inspire confidence**



#### **Hastening the process is hardly a substitute for established protocols to ensure that patients' lives are not put to risk**

The urgent need to find a quick solution to the raging Covid-19 pandemic has given rise to a global tendency to take risks and short-cuts. China's biotechnology firm CanSino has pressed into service the People's Liberation Army (PLA) epidemiologist, Major General Chen Wei, to oversee its vaccine hunt. Chen Wei herself took one of the first shots of the experimental vaccine to display national fervour.

One hopes the same fervour has not overwhelmed the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) which, along with National Institute of Virology (NIV), has thrown its weight behind a Covid-19 vaccine being developed by Bharat Biotech International Ltd (BBIL). In a letter on July 2, the DG ICMR instructed 12 institutes and hospitals to fast track clinical trials for the indigenous vaccine. Although the timeline submitted by the BBIL in its application to Clinical Trial Registry of India (CTRI) gives the date of the first enrolment of trial participants as July 13 and the entire duration of the trial to be 15 months, the DG ICMR dictated a different deadline, August 15 or Independence Day, for launching the vaccine for public use. Bhargava's letter sets a precise deadline for "public use" of the vaccine within six weeks of the commencement of clinical trials. Although the ICMR later clarified that no international or ethical protocol would be violated and that it was only cutting "red tape" and expediting early testing phases (Phase 1 and 2) so that "population-based trials for efficacy could be initiated without delay", a severe blow has already been inflicted on the autonomy of the country's premier research institution and its processes. As it turns out, the Ethics Committee in at least the AIIMS, one of the 12 sites selected for the trials, has reportedly not yet approved the protocol submitted for clinical trials. The AIIMS Director has, in fact, said that the deadline is unrealistic. The initial two phases of the clinical trials determine the doses, their safety and efficacy of a vaccine in humans. All the facilities conducting the trials have to be prepared for vaccine-associated enhanced respiratory disorders. There is no denying the urgency in the pandemic to fast track a vaccine, but clearly, not at the cost of safety and ethical standards.

Globally, there are over 150 candidate vaccines, of which about 18 are at various stages of clinical trials. Apart from Bharat Biotech, there are others in the country — a vaccine candidate developed by Serum Institute of India, Pune, in collaboration with the Oxford University and the DNA vaccine being developed by Zydus Cadila Healthcare Ltd — which have been cleared by the regulator for clinical trials. But it will only be by the end of next year that a vaccine may be ready for public use. Hastening the process is hardly a substitute for established protocols to ensure that patients' lives are not put to risk.

## 2. None gains: On U.S. withdrawal from WHO

**The U.S. stands to lose by withdrawing from the WHO; it will forego health intelligence**

On July 6, when the number of novel coronavirus cases and deaths in the U.S. reached over 2.8 million and nearly 0.13 million, respectively, the U.S. officially notified the United Nations of its intention to **withdraw membership from the World Health Organization**. This comes after President Donald Trump announced on May 29 his **decision to halt funding** and pull out of the global health body. After accusing **WHO of being “China-centric”** on multiple occasions, this unfortunate development is one more attempt by Mr. Trump to deflect blame for gross mismanagement of the crisis. In a May 18 letter, he officially **demanding that the WHO make “major substantive improvements”** in 30 days while charging that the global body lacked “independence” from China, was slow to respond to the threat, and had “repeatedly made inaccurate or misleading claims” about the virus. Since the decision has apparently been taken without the approval of Congress, and as the withdrawal will become effective only on July 6 next year, there is a possibility that Congress or courts might reverse the withdrawal. Already, Democratic challenger Joe Biden has promised to revoke it if elected President. There is much at stake and unsurprisingly Congress is already under pressure from academia and medical associations to reject the withdrawal. The capricious decision to withdraw from WHO will have dire consequences for global public health. The departure of the U.S. will be a significant blow to the WHO in terms of loss of technical expertise and, according to Mr. Trump, an annual funding of about \$450 million.

The pandemic has clearly brought to the fore several shortcomings and weaknesses in the global health body. For instance, the 2005 revision of the International Health Regulations made it mandatory for countries to notify the WHO of all events that may constitute an international public health emergency and to “respond to requests for verification of information regarding such events”. Yet, the WHO has limited power to ensure compliance by member States, including limitations in independently verifying member states' official reports. If the U.S. was majorly involved in the 2005 IHR revision, it will now have no role to play in strengthening the WHO. It will lose a seat at the table to determine the virus strain to be used for developing influenza vaccines (flu killed over 34,000 people in the U.S. in 2018-19), and have no access to new influenza

virus samples for research. With no more U.S. scientists embedded in the WHO in key roles, including outbreak response teams like the one that visited Wuhan, it will lose out on health intelligence that will compromise the country's response to international disease outbreaks. In the end, none gains from a further weakened WHO.

### **3. Visa politics: On Trump's immigration policy**

#### **Changes to U.S. visa rules might do more harm than good to the economy in the long term**

The administration of U.S. President Donald Trump seems bent on pursuing controversial immigration policy measures following the COVID-19 pandemic. Now, visa issuance to students enrolled in universities or programmes that are conducted entirely online for the fall 2020 semester will be stopped; such **students will not be permitted to enter the U.S.** The federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency also advised that active students currently in the U.S. enrolled in programmes that would be administered in online mode are required to leave the country or transfer to a university with in-person instruction to remain in lawful status. If not, ICE cautioned, they risk the initiation of removal proceedings or similar immigration consequences. Palpable ripples of anger across the U.S. education system took the form of **lawsuits, led by Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology** to block the ICE directive. This is the latest twist in an ongoing immigration policy crackdown by the Trump administration, which includes a halt in the issuance of visas for skilled workers, or H-1B and their dependents, visas for intra-company transfers, or L-1 and their dependents, and several other visa categories as well as a halt in green card processing, all until the end of the calendar year.

Taking a step back, the evolving Trump immigration paradigm leaves several big questions unanswered. First, while an argument, however harsh and myopic, could be made that the U.S. economy has suffered a battering in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and a key to recovery is to protect U.S. jobs from being cornered by foreign workers, what could the possible rationale be to imperil the lives of foreign students — all of them admitted to universities on merit, and none of them posing an immediate threat to jobs? Second, given that market forces of demand and supply have led to the U.S. economy being suffused with immigrant workers across sectors for many decades, how could the Trump administration now posit that its local population has adequate skilled labour to do the jobs that millions of Indians, Chinese and other foreign workers have so efficiently been doing all this while? Unless Mr. Trump is planning to massively overhaul the U.S. higher and professional education systems to imbue Americans with technical know-how and a culture of advanced learning, it may be futile to wall off large swathes of the economy to those capable of delivering value in such jobs. If Mr. Trump is only doing this to shore up his election campaign through political signalling, then it is the economic prospects of the very people he claims to be fighting for that he will damage in the longer term.