

Scientists discover ‘weak spot’ across all major COVID-19 variants

■ **AGENCY**
TORONTO: A team led by an Indian-origin researcher has discovered a key vulnerability across all major variants of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, including the recently emerged BA.1 and BA.2 Omicron subvariants.

The weakness can be targeted by neutralising antibodies, potentially paving the way for treatments that would be universally effective across variants, the researchers said.

The study, published on Thursday in the journal Nature Communications, used cryo-electron microscopy (cryo-EM) to reveal the atomic-level structure of the vulnerable spot on

the virus' spike protein, known as an epitope -or part to which an antibody attaches itself.

Spike protein is used by the SARS-CoV-2 virus to enter and infect human cells. The researchers also described an antibody fragment called VH Ab6 that is able to attach to this site and neutralise each major variant.

"This is a highly adaptable virus that has evolved to evade most existing antibody treatments, as well as much of the immunity conferred by vaccines and natural infection," said Sriram Subramaniam, a professor at the University of British Columbia, and the study's senior author.

"This study reveals a weak

spot that is largely unchanged across variants and can be neutralised by an antibody fragment. It sets the stage for the design of pan-variant treatments that could potentially help a lot of vulnerable people," Subramaniam said.

Antibodies are naturally produced by our bodies to fight infection, but can also be made in a laboratory and administered to patients as a treatment.

While several antibody treatments have been developed for COVID-19, their effectiveness has waned in the face of highly-mutated variants like Omicron.

"Antibodies attach to a virus in a very specific manner, like a key going into a

lock. But when the virus mutates, the key no longer fits," said Subramaniam.

"We have been looking for master keys -- antibodies that continue to neutralise the virus even after extensive mutations," he added.

The 'master key' identified by researchers is the antibody fragment VH Ab6, which was shown to be effective against the Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, Kappa, Epsilon and Omicron variants.

The fragment neutralises SARS-CoV-2 by attaching to the epitope on the spike protein and blocking the virus from entering human cells.

By mapping the molecular structure of each spike protein, the team has been

searching for areas of vulnerability that could inform new treatments.

"The epitope we describe in this paper is mostly removed from the hot spots for mutations, which is why its capabilities are preserved across variants," said Subramaniam.

"Now that we have described the structure of this site in detail, it unlocks a whole new realm of treatment possibilities," he said.

Subramaniam said this key vulnerability can now be exploited by drug makers, and because the site is relatively mutation-free, the resulting treatments could be effective against existing, and even future, variants.

Misuse of probe agencies erodes their credibility, helps corrupt get away: Congress

■ **STATE TIMES NEWS**
NEW DELHI: After the CBI raided Delhi Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia on Friday, the Congress said the "relentless misuse" of investigation agencies against political rivals erodes their credibility and can help the corrupt to get away, even though its Delhi leaders claimed the raids exposed the AAP leader's "corrupt face".

Delhi Congress leader Alka Lamba said Sisodia should face the action by the probe agency instead of "running away" to the cool climes of Himachal Pradesh. She also claimed the "corrupt face" of the self-acclaimed "truly hon-

est" minister of the Aam Aadmi Party today stands exposed.

She also accused Sisodia of ignoring norms in opening liquor vends in the national capital and thrusting the youth into liquor by reducing the legal age for drinking from 25 to 21 years.

Another Delhi Congress leader, Abhishek Dutt, accused the AAP government of indulging in corruption in the liquor policy and granting licences to those who were close to them. He also shared pictures of Sisodia and Kejriwal with those who he claimed to be running liquor vends in the national capital.

However, Congress spokesperson Pawan Khera tweeted, "The flip side to relentless misuse of agencies against political rivals is that even legitimate, rightful actions of agencies come under a cloud of suspicion. In the process, the corrupt get away hiding behind the 'misuse' argument and the honest end up paying the price." The CBI on Friday carried out searches at the residences of Manish Sisodia and IAS officer Arava Gopi Krishna and 19 other locations after registering an FIR for alleged irregularities in the formulation and execution of the Delhi Excise Policy brought out in November last year.

Rupee falls 20 paise to 79.84 against US dollar

■ **STATE TIMES NEWS**
MUMBAI: The rupee depreciated by 20 paise to close at 79.84 against the US dollar on Friday amid a strengthening greenback overseas.

At the interbank foreign exchange market, the local currency opened at 79.75 and moved in a range of 79.73 to 79.84 during the day.

It finally ended at 79.84 against the American currency, down 20 paise over its previous close of 79.64.

the capital market on Thursday as they offloaded shares worth Rs 1,706.00 crore, as per exchange data.

"Rupee continued to consolidate in a narrow range after hawkish FOMC meeting minutes," said Gaurang Somaiya, Forex & Bullion Analyst, Motilal Oswal Financial Services.

A string of US central bank officials said the Fed needs to keep raising borrowing costs to bring high inflation under control.

"We expect the USD-INR (Spot) to trade sideways and quote in the range of 79.20 and 79.80," Somaiya added.

Meanwhile, Brent crude futures, the global oil benchmark, declined 1.02 per cent to USD 95.60 per barrel.

On the domestic equity market front, the BSE Sensex ended 651.85 points or 1.08 per cent lower at 59,646.15, while the broader NSE Nifty declined 198.05 points or 1.10 per cent to 17,758.45.

"Rupee traded weak on

Friday backed by some weakness in capital markets from higher levels. The week saw volatile range between 79.35-79.90 as the dollar index stayed in a tight range," said Jateen Trivedi, VP Research Analyst at LKP Securities.

FII buying helped the rupee gain strength in the first half of the week but it later gave up the gains as the dollar index found support near USD 106 and WTI crude near USD 85, he added.

Dilip Parmar, Research Analyst, HDFC Securities, said the rupee depreciated amid stronger dollar index and risk-averse sentiments.

"Low bond price and Foreign fund outflows also weighed on the rupee."

Parmar further said the dollar index continues to retrace the mid-July to mid-August sell-off. The hawkish comments from Federal Reserve members also added fuel to the fire with markets again pricing in a 75 bps hike in the next meeting.

Parties be asked to furnish economic impact assessment of poll promises, beneficiaries to EC: Petitioner to SC

■ **STATE TIMES NEWS**
NEW DELHI: Political parties may be directed to give information to the Election Commission about the economic impact assessment of their poll promises or policies and the expected number of beneficiaries, according to a PIL in the Supreme Court on Friday opposing irrational handouts.

additional submissions on Friday in the top court saying that the registered political parties be asked to furnish relevant information on poll promises relating to freebies or welfare schemes to the Election Commission.

"That there is no dispute that the political parties can announce schemes for the welfare of the people; however, it is necessary that the electorate must have informed material about the financial and impact of the schemes announced by the political parties in their election manifesto."

"The Election Commission of India in exercise of its plenary power under Article 324 of the Constitution can direct the registered political parties to give particulars of the expected number of beneficiaries and the financial

impact on the public exchequer with regard to election promises made by them," Upadhyay said.

He also referred to the apex court decisions in which it had directed that each contesting candidate shall fill up a form provided by the Election Commission containing particulars of the criminal cases pending against them.

"The Election Commission was directed to carry out an awareness campaign in this regard. It is submitted that a similar direction may be issued in the present case by this Hon'ble Court making it mandatory for the political parties to give information regarding Economic Impact Assessment of the policies announced by it, in the format prescribed by the Election Commission of

India," it said.

On Wednesday, the CJI observed that political parties and individuals cannot be prevented from making poll promises aimed at fulfilling the constitutional mandate and the term "freebie" should not be confused with genuine welfare measures.

Earlier the PIL petitioner had provided some data on the grim economic situation of several states.

The states have outstanding liabilities of a whopping Rs 59,89,360 crore as on March 31, 2021 and the new sources of risk have emerged in the form of rising expenditure on non-merit freebies, Upadhyay had said in the written note.

While Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra top the chart with liabilities of Rs 6,62,891 crore and Rs

5,36,891 crore respectively, Punjab has the distinction of being the leader in the debt to Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) ratio.

Punjab, with a liability of Rs 2,49,187 crore, has the worst debt to GSDP ratio at 53:3 in the current fiscal, according to the written submission.

The top court is hearing the PIL which opposes the practice of political parties promising freebies during elections and seeks the Election Commission to invoke its powers to freeze their election symbols and cancel their registration.

It is also considering the distribution of freebies by the political parties from public funds and its adverse impact on the fiscal health of the country.

India will be superpower if all fulfill their duties with PM Modi's 5 resolves in mind: Adityanath

■ **STATE TIMES NEWS**
BALLIA (UP): Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Friday urged people to fulfil their duties keeping in mind the five resolves mentioned by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his Independence Day speech.

In his Independence Day address to the nation from the ramps of the Red Fort, Modi urged citizens to focus their energies on five resolutions -- to turn India into a developed nation, remove every trace of bondage, take pride in its heritage, unity and integrity, and fulfil their duties to achieve the dreams of freedom fighters by 2047.

"Prime Minister Modi on August 15 gave five resolves to the people. If every person moves on the path of duty keeping in mind the five resolves, then India will definitely become a superpower. In the days to come, India will lead the world," the Uttar Pradesh chief minister

said at a public meeting here on the occasion of Ballia Balidan Diwas.

About the occasion, Adityanath said, "It is said Ballia gives no importance to discipline. But, the discipline which was needed for the country's development after Independence, Ballia showed that. The attitude which should have been shown at the time of servitude, Ballia showed it."

"When it was needed, Mangal Pandey ignited the spark of the fight for freedom. This fight continued. When Mahatma Gandhi gave the slogan of Quit India, Chittu Pandey effectively played his role," he said.

Chittu Pandey, popularly referred to as the Sher-e Ballia (Lion of Ballia), was a revolutionary who heading the national government declared and established on 19 August 1942 for a few days before it was suppressed by the British.

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Names of 2 advocates recommended for elevation as HC judges held back by Govt

■ **STATE TIMES NEWS**
NEW DELHI: The government has held back names of two advocates recommended by the Supreme Court Collegium for appointment as judges of the Punjab and Haryana High Court, sources said.

In July, the SC Collegium had recommended names of 13 advocates for elevation as judges of the Punjab and Haryana High Court.

Acting on the recommendation, the government had notified the appointment of 11 advocates as judges on August 14.

However, it decided to hold back the names of H S Brar and Kuldeep Tiwari.

Citing certain old allegations against one and lack of experience and less age of the other, sources aware of the process to appoint members of the higher judiciary said, their names have been held back by the law ministry.

A candidate must be between 45 and 55 years of age for being considered a judge of the high court.

The government will take a "considered view" on the two names at an "appropriate time", the sources said.

They also pointed out that the government has a right to seek reconsideration from the SC Collegium for its recommendations.

Iran deal tantalizingly close, but US faces new hurdles

■ **AGENCY**
WASHINGTON: Last week's attack on author Salman Rushdie and the indictment of an Iranian national in a plot to kill former national security adviser John Bolton have given the Biden administration new headaches as it attempts to negotiate a return to the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran.

A resolution may be tantalizingly close. But as the US and Europe weigh Iran's latest response to an EU proposal described as the West's final offer, the administration faces new and potentially insurmountable domestic political hurdles to forging a lasting agreement.

Deal critics in Congress who have long vowed to blow up any pact have ratcheted up their opposition to negotiations with a country whose leadership has refused to rescind the death threats against Rushdie or Bolton. Iran also vows to avenge the Trump administration's 2020 assassination of a top Iranian general by killing former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Iran envoy Brian Hook, both of whom remain under 24/7 taxpayer-paid security protection.

Although such threats are not covered by the deal, which relates solely to Iran's nuclear program, they underscore deal opponents' arguments that Iran cannot be trusted with the billions of dollars in sanctions relief it will receive if and when it and the US return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA, a signature foreign policy accomplishment of the Obama administration that President Donald Trump withdrew from in 2018.

This is a tougher deal to sell than the 2015 deal in that this time around there are no illusions that it will serve to moderate Iranian behaviour or lead to greater US-Iran cooperation, said Karim Sadjadpour, an Iran expert at

the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

The Iranian government stands to get tens of billions in sanctions relief, and the organizing principle of the regime will continue to be opposition to the United States and violence against its critics, both at home and abroad, he said.

Iran has denied any link with Rushdie's alleged attacker, an American citizen who was indicted for attempted murder and has pleaded not guilty in the August 12 stabbing at a literary event in Western New York. But Iranian state media have celebrated Iran's long-standing antipathy toward Rushdie since the 1988 publication of his book The Satanic Verses, which some believe is insulting to Islam.

Media linked to Iran's leadership have lauded the attacker for following through on a 1989 decree, or fatwa, calling for Rushdie to be killed that was signed by Iran's then-Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

And the man who was charged with plotting to murder Bolton is a member of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps. The Justice Department alleges the IRGC tried to pay USD 300,000 to people in the United States to avenge the death of Qassam Soleimani, the head of its elite Quds Force who was killed by a US airstrike in Iraq in 2020.

I think it's delusional to believe that a regime that you're about to enter into a significant arms control agreement with can be depended on to comply with its obligations or is even serious about the negotiation when it's plotting the assassination of high-level former government officials and current government officials, Bolton told reporters Wednesday.

It certainly looks like the attack on Salman Rushdie had a Revolutionary

Guard component, Bolton said. We've got to stop this artificial division when dealing with the government of Iran between its nuclear activities on the one hand and its terrorist activities on the other.

Granting terrorism sanctions relief amid ongoing terror plots on US soil is somewhere between outrageous and lunacy, said Rich Goldberg, a former Trump administration national security council staffer and longtime deal critic who is now a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, which has also lobbied against a return to the JCPOA.

While acknowledging the seriousness of the plots, administration officials contend that they are unrelated to the nuclear issue and do nothing to change their long-held belief that an Iran with a nuclear weapon would be more dangerous and less constrained than an Iran without one.

The JCPOA is about the single, central challenge we face with Iran, the core challenge, what would be the most threatening challenge we could possibly face from Iran, and that is a nuclear weapon, State Department spokesman Ned Price said this week.

There is no doubt that a nuclear-armed Iran would feel an even greater degree of impunity, and would pose an even greater threat, a far greater threat, to countries in the region and potentially well beyond.

Every challenge we face with Iran, whether it is its support for proxies, its support for terrorist groups, its ballistic missiles program, its malign cyber activities every single one of those would be more difficult to confront were Iran to have a nuclear weapons program, he said.

That argument, however, will be challenged in Congress by lawmakers

who opposed the 2015 deal, saying it gave Iran a path to develop nuclear weapons by time-limiting the most onerous restrictions on its nuclear activities. They say there's now even more tangible evidence that Iran's malign behavior make it impossible to deal with.

Two of the most outspoken critics of the deal, Republican senators Ted Cruz of Texas and Tom Cotton of Arkansas, have weighed in on what the Rushdie attack should mean for the administration.

The ayatollahs have been trying to murder Salman Rushdie for decades, Cruz said. Their incitement and their contacts with this terrorist resulted in an attack. This vicious terrorist attack needs to be completely condemned. The Biden administration must finally cease appeasing the Iranian regime.

Iran's leaders have been calling for the murder of Salman Rushdie for decades, said Cotton. We know they're trying to assassinate American officials today. Biden needs to immediately end negotiations with this terrorist regime.

Under the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act, or INARA, the administration must submit any agreement with Iran for congressional review within five days of it being sealed. That begins a 30-day review period during which lawmakers may weigh in and no sanctions relief can be offered. That timeline means that even if a deal is reached within the next week, the administration will not be able to start moving on sanctions relief until the end of September, just a month from crucial congressional midterm elections. And, it will take additional time for Iran to begin seeing the benefits of such relief because of logistical constraints.

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Terrorist aide involved in routing Hawala money arrested from Delhi

■ **STATE TIMES NEWS**
NEW DELHI: A 48-year-old Delhi based garment trader allegedly working as an agent in routing hawala money to terror outfits Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Al Badr has been arrested from here, police said on Friday.

Mohammad Yaseen, a resident of Turkman Gate here, was arrested in a joint operation by police from Delhi and Jammu and Kashmir and central agencies on Thursday, they said.

During interrogation, Yaseen revealed to the police that hawala money was being routed to India through South Africa and collected in Surat and Mumbai.

He ran a garment business in Meena Bazaar and was the Delhi link to send this money to terror operatives in Jammu and Kashmir through couriers, Special Commissioner of Police (Special Cell) HGS Dhaliwal said.

The officer said recently,

Rs 24 lakh hawala money was sent from South Africa to support terror activities in India. Out of this, Yaseen transferred Rs 17 lakh through two couriers to a terror operative named Abdul Hamid Mir in Jammu and Kashmir.

The police, however, arrested Mir from Jammu bus stand on Wednesday and recovered Rs 10 lakh cash from him. The remaining Rs 7 lakh were recovered from his house, Dhaliwal said.

Army organises screening of movie 'Major'

■ **STATE TIMES NEWS**
REASI: Celebrating 'Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav' Indian Army organised screening of movie 'Major' for the youth at Dandihala in Reasi district. The event was aimed at inspiring patriotism among youth and provide insight into life of Major Unnikrishnan, Ashok Chakra who made supreme sacrifice for our nation during 26/11 Mumbai attack. Total of 25 youth from the area participated in the event with enthusiasm. The initiative would not only inculcate spirit of patriotism among the young generation but also further strengthen the bond between Indian Army and Awaam.

Deputy NSA Misri attends SCO meet in Tashkent; calls for combating terrorism

■ **STATE TIMES NEWS**
NEW DELHI: Deputy National Security Adviser Vikram Misri on Friday attended a conclave of top security officials of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in Tashkent, where he called for united efforts to combat terrorism and terror financing.

In his address, Misri also emphasised India's humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan.

"Dy NSA @VikramMisri participated in SCO NSAs meeting in Tashkent. Called for combating terrorism, terror financing, transnational organized crime, illicit drug trafficking and strengthening information security," the Indian embassy in Uzbekistan tweeted. "Emphasized India's humanitarian assistance to Afghan people," it said.

Misri also met Uzbekistan's Acting Foreign Minister Vladimir Norov and discussed advancing bilateral cooperation in areas of security and defence.

Norov described the talks "very fruitful".

"We discussed a wide range of issues on the Uzbek-Indian agenda, as well as interaction within the framework of multilateral structures, in particular the #SCO," Norov tweeted.

