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Inside C2

Southern DAILY

Make Today Different

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Taliban could take Afghan capital in 90 days after rapid gains -U.S. intelligence

WASHINGTON/KABUL, Aug 11 (Reuters) - Taliban fighters could isolate Afghanistan's capital in 30 days and possibly take it over in 90, a U.S. defence official cited U.S. intelligence as saying, as the resurgent militants made more advances across the country.

The official, speaking to Reuters on condition of anonymity on Wednesday, said the new assessment of how long Kabul could stand was a result of the Taliban's rapid gains as U.S.-led foreign forces leave.

"But this is not a foregone conclusion," the official added, saying that the Afghan security forces could reverse the momentum by putting up more resistance.

The Islamists now control 65% of Afghanistan and have taken or threaten to take 11 provincial capitals, a senior EU official said on Tuesday. Faizabad, in the northeastern province of Badakhshan, on Wednesday became the eighth provincial capital to be seized by the Taliban.

A doctor based in southern Kandahar said the city was receiving scores of bodies of Afghan forces, and some injured Taliban fighters were also seeking medical support. The fighting was extremely intense in Kandahar city, he said.

All gateways to Kabul, which lies in a valley surrounded by mountains, were choked with civilians entering the city and fleeing violence elsewhere, a Western security source there said. It was hard to tell whether Taliban fighters were also getting through, the source said.

"The fear is of suicide bombers entering the diplomatic quarters to scare, attack and ensure everyone leaves at the earliest opportunity," he said.

Foreign countries are trying to ensure their staff leave Kabul quickly, five foreign security officials told Reuters. One said international airlines were also being asked to evacuate staff.

The speed of the Taliban advance has shocked the government and its allies. The group, which controlled most of Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, when they were ousted for harbouring al Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden after Sept. 11, wants to defeat the U.S.-backed government and reimpose strict Islamic law. read more



U.S. State Department spokesman Ned Price said the attacks were against the spirit of a 2020 agreement.

The Taliban committed to talks on a peace accord that would lead to a "permanent and comprehensive ceasefire," Price said on Wednesday. "All indications at least suggest the Taliban are instead pursuing a battlefield victory."

"Attacking provincial capitals and targeting civilians is inconsistent with the spirit of the agreement," he said.

The United Nations said more than 1,000 civilians had been killed in the past month, and the International Committee of the Red Cross said that since Aug. 1 some 4,042 wounded people had been treated at 15 health facilities. read more

The Taliban denied targeting or killing civilians and called for an independent investigation. read more

The group "has not targeted any civilians or their homes in any locality, rather the operations have been undertaken with great precision and caution," spokesperson Suhail Shaheen said in a statement on Wednesday.

PEACE TALKS

Afghanistan president Ashraf Ghani arrives in Mazar-i-Sharif to check the security situation of the northern provinces, Afghanistan August 11, 2021. Afghan presidential palace/Handout via REUTERS

Taliban fighters stand guard at a check point in Farah, Afghanistan August 11, 2021. REUTERS/Stringer

A general view of green zone in Kabul, Afghanistan March 13, 2019. REUTERS/Omar Sobhani/File Photo

The loss of Faizabad was the latest setback for the government of President Ashraf Ghani, who flew to Mazar-i-Sharif to rally old warlords to the defence of the biggest city in the north as Taliban forces closed in.

Ghani spent years sidelining the warlords as he tried to project the authority of his central government over wayward provinces.

Jawad Mujadidi, a provincial council member from Badakhshan, said the Taliban had laid siege to Faizabad before launch-

ing its offensive on Tuesday.

"With the fall of Faizabad, the whole of the northeast has come under Taliban control," Mujadidi told Reuters.

U.S. President Joe Biden said on Tuesday he did not regret his decision to withdraw and urged Afghan leaders to fight for their homeland.

Washington had spent more than \$1 trillion over 20 years and lost thousands of U.S. troops, and continued to provide significant air support, food, equipment and salaries to Afghan forces, he said.

The Afghans "need to determine ... if they have the political will to fight back and if they have the ability to unite as leaders to fight back," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said.

She declined to comment on assessments that Kabul could be overtaken by the Taliban in 90 days, which were first reported by the Washington Post, but said the plan to withdraw troops by Aug. 31 held.

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WEA LEE'S GLOBAL NOTES

CORONAVIRUS DIARY

08/11/2021

I Am In The Nation's Capital



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Today I came back to Washington, DC and visited the downtown area with all the many law firms and business buildings. There are so many people walking on the streets, the traffic is so busy and they all are taking the business as usual.

One of the busiest groups were the TV and media reporters. They are always on the street or in front of the White House and government buildings ready to interview people. They are always waiting for the



politicians who love the TV cameras.

Today President Biden celebrated the Senate's passage of the \$1.2 trillion bipartisan infrastructure package. This is the biggest bipartisan win of his presidency so far. He said that, "After years and years of

'Infrastructure Week' we're on the cusp of an infrastructure decade that I truly believe will transform America."

The President wanted to personally thank the Republican senators who supported this bill. The bill is called the Infrastructure

Investment and Jobs Act that includes \$550 billion in new federal spending over five years.

We are so glad this bill finally has passed with a 69-30 margin. We could see that most of the senators know that we need to rebuild all over America.



Southern DAILY Make Today Different

Editor's Choice



New York Governor Andrew Cuomo arrives to depart in his helicopter after announcing his resignation in Manhattan. REUTERS/Caitlin Ochs



Firefighting helicopters are filled with water off the beach of the village of Pefki, on the island of Evia, Greece. REUTERS/Nicolas Economou



Lionel Messi arrives at the Royal Monceau Hotel in Paris to join Paris St Germain. REUTERS/Sarah Meyssonier



Joan Bronson, of Chalmette Louisiana, who is being treated for coronavirus at the Ochsner Medical Center in Jefferson Parish, Louisiana. REUTERS/Kathleen Flynn



Demonstrators take part in a protest against the government's handling of the coronavirus pandemic, in Bangkok, Thailand. REUTERS/Soe Zeya Tun



An internally displaced child from northern provinces, who fled from his home due to the fighting between Taliban and Afghan security forces, sleeps in a public park that they use as shelter in Kabul, Afghanistan. REUTERS/Stringer

Texas Governor Abbott Seeks Outside Help Against COVID-19



Texas Governor Greg Abbott appeals for out-of-state help to fight the 3rd wave of COVID-19 in the state.

Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor

Governor Greg Abbott appealed for out-of-state help to fight the third wave of COVID-19 in Texas while two more of the state's largest school districts announced mask mandates in defiance of the governor. Abbott's request Monday came as a county-owned hospital in Houston raised tents to accommodate their COVID-19 overflow. Private hospitals in the county already were requiring their staff to be vaccinated against the coronavirus. Meantime, the Dallas and Austin school districts announced Monday that they would require students and staff to wear face masks. The Houston school district already announced a mask mandate for its students and staff later this week if its board approves.

The highly contagious delta variant is fueling the wave.

The Republican governor has directed the Texas Department of State Health Services to use staffing agencies to find additional medical staff from beyond the state's borders as the delta wave began to overwhelm its present staffing resources. He also has sent a letter to the Texas Hospital Association to request that hospitals postpone all elective medical procedures voluntarily.

Hospital officials in Houston said last week that area hospitals with beds had insufficient numbers of nurses to serve them. Abbott also directed the state health department and the Texas Division of Emergency Management to open additional COVID-19 antibody infusion centers to treat patients not needing hospital care and expand COVID-19 vaccine availability to the state's underserved communities. He also announced about \$267 million in emergency Supplemental

Nutrition Assistance Program food benefits for August. That was on top of the \$3.9 billion in benefits previously allocated since April 2020.



The governor is taking action short of lifting his emergency order banning county and local government entities from requiring the wearing of masks and social distancing to lower the COVID-19 risk. Abbott has said repeatedly that Texans have the information and intelligence to make their own decisions on what steps to take to protect their health and the health of those around them. Also Monday, Dallas County Judge Clay Jenkins filed a lawsuit asking a judge to strike down Abbott's mask mandate ban.

Meantime, one of Houston's two county-owned hospitals was pitching tents to accommodate its COVID-19 overflow. Harris Health System and Lyndon B. Johnson Hospital in northeastern Houston added nearly 2,000 square feet of medical tents in the hope of taking control of the anticipated increase in patient volume and keep staff and non-COVID-19 patients safe. Last week, Houston area officials said the wave of delta variant infections so strained the area's

hospitals that some patients had to be transferred out of the city, with one being sent to North Dakota.



Austin-Travis County medics wearing personal protective clothing (PPE), prepare to enter a nursing home on August 05, 2020 in Austin, Texas. / Credit: John Moore / Getty Images

In Dallas, the superintendent of the state's second-largest public school system announced Monday that the district would require masks and social distancing from Tuesday, Abbott's ban notwithstanding. At a news conference, Dallas schools Superintendent Michael Hinojosa said the school district's legal advisors assured that Abbott's order does not limit the district's rights as an employer and educational institution to establish reasonable and necessary safety rules for its staff and students.

Austin schools announced their mask requirement late Monday.

The superintendent of the Houston school district, the state's largest, announced last week that the district would require masks and social distancing in the district's schools effective upon district board approval Thursday. A group of parents sued the Houston Independent School District over the weekend, challenging the requirements.

The rolling two-week daily average of new COVID-19 cases has increased by 165% to 8,533, according to Johns Hopkins University research data. About 45% of the state's population has been vaccinated against the coronavirus, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.



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Related

Austin Warns Of 'Catastrophe' As Texas Again Becomes Center Of Pandemic
City says residents should stay home, mask up and get vaccinated as ICU capacity in hospitals dwindles to single digits

With Covid-19 cases skyrocketing exponentially and intensive care unit capacity in hospitals dwindling to single digits, officials in the Austin area are warning of "catastrophe" as Texas again becomes a center of the pandemic. Austin's local governments issued an urgent message through their emergency notification system Saturday, imploring residents to stay home, mask up and get vaccinated. The entreaty comes mere days after Austin Public Health elevated its risk-based guidance to stage 5, the highest possible tier.

"The situation is critical," Desmar Walkes, Austin-Travis county's health authority, said in a statement. "Our hospitals are severely stressed and there is little we can do to alleviate their burden with the surging cases."

The Texas trauma service area that includes Austin only has six available ICU beds, 499

available hospital beds and 313 available ventilators — a stunning dearth of resources for a population nearly 2.4 million strong. In Austin's metropolitan statistical area, 510 Covid patients are currently hospitalized, 184 are in the ICU, and 102 are on ventilators.



About a third of recent hospitalizations have been among patients younger than 50, underscoring the Delta variant's serious threat to younger Texans who have opted against vaccination. "Hospital bed availability and critical care is extremely limited in our hospital systems, not just for Covid-19 patients, but for anyone who may need treatment," Walkes said. "The community has to come together again and stave off disaster."

As a whole, Texas currently ranks second behind Florida for the highest daily average Covid-19 cases, with infections up 134% over the last 14 days. And between early February and mid-July, roughly 99.5% of Texans who died from the virus were unvaccinated, the Texas Tribune reported. In Austin's Travis county, almost 64% of kids and adults 12 and older are fully vaccinated, compared to about 53% statewide. But in some neighboring counties and suburbs, vaccination rates are even lower than the state average. Recently, San Antonio's Bexar county had its daily average caseload jump by more than 300%, according to the New York Times. And infections are also surging in Houston's Harris county, where only about 56% of those 12 and older are fully vaccinated and the 14-day average test positivity rate is a whopping 17.7%.



Meanwhile, local officials who want to implement proven public health measures to mitigate the spread have been hamstrung by the Texas governor, Greg Abbott, who has implemented a sweeping order restricting vaccine and mask mandates.

But some public servants, like Houston's mayor, Sylvester Turner, have simply defied Abbott's order despite threats of retribution.

"The governor is preventing the city from keeping kids and adults safe," Austin city council member Alison Alter told the New York Times. "He's going to have a lot of deaths on his hands here. This is a matter of life and death for our community." (Courtesy <https://www.theguardian.com/>)

How COVID-19 Can Be Crippled By An Age-Old Blood Thinner



The blood thinner heparin could be used to trap SARS-CoV-2, effectively neutralizing the virus before it can infect healthy cells, a Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute team said. (Maksim Tkachenko/iStock/Getty Images Plus)

Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor

Much of the effort to develop remedies and vaccines to fight COVID-19 has centered around the spike protein that the culprit virus, SARS-CoV-2, uses to invade healthy cells. Scientists at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute believe they've found a way to block the spike protein's ability to infect cells—and it involves a 78-year-old blood thinner.

The drug is heparin, which is widely used to treat and prevent blood clots. The RPI team discovered that SARS-CoV-2 binds tightly to heparin, making the drug a potential "decoy" that could serve as a way to neutralize the virus before it can infect healthy cells. They reported the finding (PDF) in the journal Antiviral Research. The RPI researchers made the discovery by studying gene sequencing data for SARS-CoV-2 and recognizing certain characteristics of the spike protein they believed would make it likely to bind to heparin. They tested three variants of the drug, including a non-anticoagulant formulation, against the virus, using computational modeling to define how they bound to the pathogen.



By binding to SARS-CoV-2, the blood thinner traps the virus, "which can't exist really sitting there, bound to the heparin. It'll just degrade," explained Jonathan Dordick, Ph.D., professor of chemical and biological engineering at RPI, in a video. Dordick's team was already working on methods for trapping viruses when the COVID-19 pandemic started spreading. The researchers developed a viral trap technology that uses pieces of DNA to mimic the latching sites on human cells, and they published research showing promising early data in dengue, influenza A and Zika.

While looking for ways to translate the viral trap technology to COVID-19, Dordick teamed up with Robert Linhardt, Ph.D., professor of chemistry and chemical biology at RPI, who is

well known for his creation of synthetic heparin. Some blood thinners are already being used by physicians treating COVID-19. Demand for Bristol Myers Squibb's Eliquis skyrocketed earlier this year following reports that the drug could prevent strokes in seriously ill patients. The RPI researchers are proposing that heparin be used as a stopgap measure against COVID-19 until a vaccine is found. The drug could be delivered in an inhaled form to people who have been exposed to COVID-19, they suggested.



"This approach could be used as an early intervention to reduce the infection among people who have tested positive, but aren't yet suffering symptoms," said lead author Linhardt in a statement. "Ultimately, we want a vaccine, but there are many ways to combat a virus, and as we've seen with HIV, with the right combination of therapies, we can control the disease until a vaccine is found." (Courtesy <https://www.fiercebiotech.com/>)

Related

COVID-19: Bio researchers race to repurpose everything from antiviral to anticancer discoveries

Jonathan Dordick, Ph.D., and his lab mates at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) weren't thinking about coronaviruses when they initially developed their "viral trap," a DNA-based nanotechnology designed to capture and kill viruses floating in the bloodstream. But as the COVID-19 pandemic started to unfold, they realized they may be able to transform their invention into a potential solution to the relentless virus—and they got to work on a plan to do so.



The rapidly growing understanding of COVID-19 has inspired several research groups to propose new methods for prevent-

ing and curing the disease. (ESB Professional/Shutterstock)

Jonathan Dordick, Ph.D., and his lab mates at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) weren't thinking about coronaviruses when they initially developed their "viral trap," a DNA-based nanotechnology designed to capture and kill viruses floating in the bloodstream. But as the COVID-19 pandemic started to unfold, they realized they may be able to transform their invention into a potential solution to the relentless virus—and they got to work on a plan to do so.

"We have something that can be tailored specifically to the virus," said Dordick, professor of chemical and biological engineering at RPI, in an interview with FierceBiotechResearch. "There has been very rapid research that has come out in the last couple of months about the proteins on the surface of the coronavirus. Once we know their approximate location on the surface, and what the receptor is [on cells] that the virus targets, it allows us to very quickly tailor this DNA nanostructure" to COVID-19, he said. Dordick's team has developed a research proposal, which includes testing the viral trap technology in animal models of COVID-19, he added.

RPI is one of several institutions stepping up with ideas of how to take existing research and pivot it toward potential solutions to COVID-19. And these ideas are not just bubbling up in academia. Some biotech startups are taking existing antiviral discoveries—or even technologies they initially developed to address very different diseases, like cancer—and offering to deploy them toward defeating the coronavirus.



It may take several months or even years for these efforts to bear fruit, at which point this pandemic may have ended, but that's no deterrent, many scientists say. "We will see new viruses being passed from animals to humans again," predicted Christian Peters, M.D., Ph.D., CEO of Pinpoint Therapeutics, in an interview with FierceBiotechResearch. Pinpoint is one of the companies that's putting plans in place to target COVID-19. "We must have an armamentarium of different drugs with different mech-

anisms so we're ready for the future that's to come," Peters said. RPI's viral trap is adaptable to a range of viruses due to its design, Dordick explained.

The next step would be to use the same nanotechnology platform to kill the virus once it's snared in the trap. "In detecting the virus, we're also preventing it from binding to its receptor," he said. "We showed that the DNA binds to the proteins on the surface of the dengue virus, preventing them from infecting the target cell. In that way, we can inhibit the infection process." Dordick's team has shown that a similar approach is effective in preclinical models of influenza A and Zika virus, as well.



Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania discovered that inhibiting PPT1 slows tumor growth—a finding that led to the formation of Pinpoint, which is now optimizing PPT1 inhibitors to test in cancer. Pinpoint has received seed funding from Kairos Ventures, which in February kicked in \$1 million in debt funding to help accelerate the search for candidate drugs. Although it will take several months to complete the laboratory and animal studies needed to identify drug candidates against COVID-19, Peters believes the insights they gain will remain relevant, even if the pandemic has resolved by that time. "It's important to look not just at the anti-viral components, but also at the anti-inflammatory properties that these drugs might have."

The rapidly unfolding COVID-19 pandemic has inspired the scientific community to come up with solutions that will have the potential to save lives in the future, RPI's Dordick said. "The key question after we get through this tragedy is, 'how will we avoid it again?'" Dordick said. "Will we have to shut everything down again, or can we have directed therapeutic development? I think we're learning the lesson that we need rapid vaccine development and rapid therapeutic development. We're going to learn an awful lot about what we can do." (Courtesy <https://www.fiercebiotech.com/>)