VOA NEWS

May 15, 2020

This is VOA news. Reporting by remote, I'm David Byrd.

A government whistleblower who says his early warnings about coronavirus preparedness were ignored says America's window to get ready for a resurgence is closing. AP's Sagar Meghani reports.

Appearing before a House panel, Dr. Rick Bright says his early virus preparedness concerns were dismissed. Among other things, he is worried about efforts to develop a vaccine.

"We need to have a strategy and plan in place now to make sure that we can not only fill that vaccine, make it, distribute it, administer it in a fair and equitable plan."

The White House has set up Operation Warp Speed to do that and President Trump is disputing Bright's belief that it'll take longer than a year and a half to develop a vaccine.

"I think we're gonna have a vaccine by the end of the year. And I think distribution will take place almost simultaneously ...."

He's calling Bright "an angry" and "disgruntled employee."

Sagar Meghani, Washington.

Nearly three million laid off workers applied for U.S. unemployment benefits last week as the viral outbreak forced more companies to slash jobs even though some states have begun to let businesses reopen.

In an AP interview, Bankrate.com's Mark Hamrick says the U.S. economy could get a lot worse before it gets better.

"Well above 30 million total new claims for unemployment benefits, we know that the unemployment rate was elevated in the month of April and that there is no relief o that ???, either."

Roughly 36 million people have now sought jobless aid in just the two months since the coronavirus first forced businesses to close. An additional 842,000 people applied for aid last week through a separate program for self-employed and gig workers.

All told, the figures point to a job market that's gripped by its worst crisis in decades and an economy that is sinking into a downturn.

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U.S. Senator Richard Burr is stepping aside as chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee during an investigation of stock trades he made before sharp market downturn triggered by the coronavirus pandemic.

Republican Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said Burr contacted him Thursday morning to inform him of his decision to step aside during the investigation.

In a statement, McConnell said that he and Burr agreed that this decision would be in the best interests of the committee.

Burr has denied any wrongdoing and said he relied solely on news reports to guide decisions on stock sales amid reports that he and other senators sold their shares after private briefings on the risk of the coronavirus crisis.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe lifted a state of emergency in large parts of his country Thursday but said it would remain in place in Tokyo and Osaka until the novel coronavirus is contained. Emer McCarthy of Reuters has more.

The world's third largest economy declared the nationwide state of emergency a month ago, urging citizens to reduce person-to-person contact by 80 percent to slow the spread of the virus and ease pressure on medical services across the country.

"While controlling the spread of the virus as much as possible by acting on the premise that the virus is all around us, we will restore ordinary work and daily life."

The 39 prefectures in which the emergency has been lifted account for 54 percent of Japan's population but the greater Tokyo area alone accounts for a third of the economy.

Abe said experts will assess the situation for the areas under restriction next week.

That's Reuters Emer McCarthy.

A vaccine to counter the new coronavirus could be approved in about a year in an "optimistic" scenario. That's according to an agency which approves medicines for the European Union. Lauren Anthony of Reuters has more.

The European Medicines Agency is in communication with 33 developers and its head of vaccines, Marco Cavaleri, said it's doing all it can to speed up the approval process but that he was skeptical of claims any could be ready by September.

He ruled out the possibility of skipping the third phase of a vaccine trial, which he said was necessary to ensure a vaccine was safe and effective.

The EMA is also investigating 115 different therapeutics for the coronavirus.

Cavaleri said some of those treatments could be approved in Europe as early as this summer, though he did not specify which.

That's Reuters Lauren Anthony.

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