

WHILE YOU WEREN'T LOOKING

Africa Is Officially Polio-Free

The continent has largely eradicated wild polio, the crowning achievement of a massive, globally coordinated public health effort.

BY AMY MACKINNON | AUGUST 28, 2020, 3:00 PM

Welcome to While You Weren't Looking, *Foreign Policy's* weekly newsletter focused on non-coronavirus news.

Here's what we're watching this week: **Africa is certified polio-free**—a significant global milestone, Russian President Vladimir Putin threatens to deploy a **reserve police force in Belarus**, and how **Mark Zuckerberg** stoked fears in Washington over TikTok.

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Africa Declared Free of Wild Polio

Africa was **certified free of wild polio** this week, a significant milestone in efforts to eradicate the disease worldwide. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the director-general of the World Health Organization (WHO), described the declaration as “one of the greatest public health achievements of our time.”

Since 1988, when WHO launched the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, wild polio infections have been reduced by 99 percent worldwide. The virus, which once paralyzed some **75,000** children annually in Africa, is now only found in Afghanistan and Pakistan, where **165 people** were affected by wild polio last year.

Health care workers have traveled from house to house across the continent to vaccinate children, navigating conflict zones, challenging terrain, and misinformation. In 2003, Kano and other states in northern Nigeria **halted vaccination efforts** after local religious leaders said the vaccine was part of a plot by the United States to render local Muslim women infertile. Immunization efforts resumed the following year, but mistrust lingered.

Last year, *Foreign Policy's* **Jefcoate O'Donnell traveled to Kano** to report on how traditional and religious leaders, polio survivors, and a network of 20,000 women

joined forces to alleviate lingering distrust in the vaccine. The last confirmed case of wild polio in Nigeria was reported in 2016.

Some **95 percent** of Africa's population has now been immunized against the virus—one of the prerequisite conditions set by the Africa Regional Certification Commission, an independent body of experts appointed by WHO to verify polio eradication efforts. This week's declaration marks the second time that public health efforts have wiped out a lethal virus from the continent. The first was smallpox, which was eradicated worldwide 40 years ago.

The campaign against polio is the **largest** internationally coordinated public health effort in history. The initiative has been led by national governments along with five partners: WHO, **Rotary** International, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, UNICEF, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

What about vaccine-derived polio? Unlike most diseases that find reservoirs elsewhere, polio can be **eradicated** as the virus dies out if it is unable to find an unimmunized person to infect and continue the spread. Two strains of the virus have already been **stamped out**. But while Africa has been declared free of wild polio, a small number of vaccine-derived cases persist, stemming from the use of more affordable oral polio vaccines.

Weakened live versions of the virus contained in the oral vaccine replicate in a child's intestines, conferring immunity, before being excreted. In places with poor sanitation and large numbers of unvaccinated people, excreted forms of the vaccine can make their way into the water supply and spark an outbreak. So far this year, Africa has **recorded** 177 cases of vaccine-derived polio.

Lessons learned. In an **op-ed for Al Jazeera**, Tedros and Holger Knaack, the president of **Rotary** International, said the lessons learned from polio eradication efforts could be applied in the fight against COVID-19. "As recently as 2012, half of all globally recorded cases of wild polio virus were in **Nigeria**—the last country in the region to rid itself of the virus. However, as with the COVID-19 pandemic, the lesson is that it is never too late to turn a disease outbreak around," they wrote.

What We're Following

All the Kremlin's little green men. In an **interview** aired on Russian state TV on Thursday, President Vladimir Putin said he had formed a reserve police force and was ready to intervene in neighboring Belarus if the situation got "out of control." Putin's comments upped the ante as Belarus is seeing unprecedented street protests in the wake of the Aug. 9 presidential election, with the results widely believed to be

falsified. Putin said he had created the reserve force at the request of the country's embattled president, Aleksandr Lukashenko, adding that the force had not yet been deployed.

Opposition supporters rally to protest against disputed presidential election results in Minsk, Belarus, on Aug. 23. SERGEI GAPON/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

A longtime ally of Moscow, Lukashenko has positioned Belarus as a loyal buffer state between Russia and the European Union. Putin has long feared that his population might be inspired by a popular uprising that topples a long-standing authoritarian—Lukashenko has ruled Belarus for 26 years. But analysts believe the Kremlin has little appetite to expend the significant resources required to prop up an unpopular leader.

While a repeat of Russia's 2014 military invasion of Ukraine is unlikely in Belarus, the Kremlin has **plenty of pressure points**, from energy supplies to its influence over Belarusian state media.

Rising conflict in Colombia. Over the past two weeks, illegal armed groups have killed dozens of people in a **series of massacres** across Colombia, sparking fears that the 2016 peace deal ending five decades of civil war may be unraveling. There have been 46 massacres, defined as the killing of three or more people in a single attack, since the start of the year, including seven in the past two weeks.

The attacks have evoked memories of the 1990s, when illegal paramilitary groups killed civilians en masse to assert control and sow terror. The 2016 peace deal with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) militant group brought fragile peace. But the landmark deal, which helped win then-President Juan Manuel Santos a Nobel Peace Prize, is now floundering as former fighters have taken up arms once again and criminal gangs and drug traffickers have **moved into regions** abandoned by FARC, jostling for control of the lucrative narcotics and mining industries.

Rising tensions in the Mediterranean. Turkey and Greece **announced** this week that they will conduct rival military exercises off the coast of the Greek island of Crete as tensions escalate over competing claims to oil and gas reserves in the eastern Mediterranean Sea. France, Italy, and Cyprus joined Greece's naval exercises this week in bid to deter Turkey from further energy exploration, but the EU remains divided over how to respond to Turkey's increasingly aggressive behavior.

German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas **called** for all drills to be brought to a halt over concerns that the situation could spiral. "Fire is being played with, and any small spark could lead to catastrophe," he said. In February, the EU **imposed sanctions** on two Turkish nationals over Ankara's natural gas exploration within the exclusive economic zone of Cyprus.

Keep an Eye On

Time's up for TikTok? Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg sought to stoke fears in Washington over Chinese tech companies and in particular the rival video-sharing app TikTok, according to the *Wall Street Journal*. TikTok is owned by the Beijing-based company ByteDance. In meetings with lawmakers and officials last year, Zuckerberg warned that the app posed a risk to freedom of expression as well as U.S. dominance in tech.

The warnings came as Zuckerberg sought to **defend** Facebook against the U.S. government's antitrust review of Silicon Valley. In a private dinner with President Donald Trump in October 2019, Zuckerberg, who spent years courting Chinese President Xi Jinping in hopes of winning admission to the country for Facebook, warned that the threat of Chinese tech companies should be a greater concern than regulating Facebook.

Last November, the United States **opened a national security review** of TikTok after a number of senators raised concerns. Trump signed two executive orders against the app this month, the first seeking to ban it in the United States and the second giving ByteDance 90 days to divest from its U.S. assets and data gathered in the country. On

Monday, TikTok **announced** that it was suing the U.S. government over Trump's executive orders.

That's billion with a B. If the New START arms control treaty between Russia and the United States is not extended or replaced next year, it could cost Washington **hundreds of billions of dollars** if the U.S. nuclear arsenal is expanded as a result, according to a report released on Tuesday by the Congressional Budget Office (CBO), a nonpartisan federal agency. The last remaining agreement that constrains the two countries' nuclear arsenals is due to expire in February 2021.

Depending on how the United States responds to the lapse, it could require no additional funding or as much as \$439 billion in one-time acquisition costs and \$28 billion in annual operating costs, **according to the CBO analysis**. The Trump administration has repeatedly raised the idea of bringing China into the treaty, but the Chinese Foreign Ministry said in February that Beijing had "**no intention**" of joining trilateral talks.

Protests in Libya. Hundreds of people took to the streets in the Libyan capital of Tripoli and the city of Misrata this week in **anti-government protests** over deteriorating living conditions, corruption, and water and electricity shortages. Several protesters were wounded after armed men allegedly aligned with the U.N.-backed government used live fire to disperse a protest on Sunday, according to **Amnesty International**. The human rights group said six protesters were abducted and their whereabouts remains unknown.

Libya tipped into chaos in 2011 after Muammar al-Qaddafi was toppled. Over the past year, the civil conflict has descended into a proxy war as several countries, including Russia and Turkey, have backed rival forces.

Odds and Ends

Battle vestments. The Russian military **unveiled** camouflage robes and green candles for priests accompanying Russian troops in field exercises and onto the battlefield as part of an annual military expo this week. The ankle-length robes feature miniature Orthodox crucifixes in place of button holes and will bear the priest's name and rank within the Orthodox Church.

The items were on display at the Russian Armed Forces Cathedral, one of the world's largest Orthodox cathedrals, which was **consecrated** this summer in honor of the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II. The Orthodox Church and the Russian military have formed the cornerstones of **efforts to stir up patriotism** under Putin.

That's it for this week.

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