

Tribal politician elected as India's president

Droupadi Murmu will be only second woman to hold the office in the country

NEW DELHI • Ms Droupadi Murmu has been elected as president of India, becoming the first tribal politician to occupy the top constitutional post in the world's largest democracy.

Ms Murmu, who belongs to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling coalition, defeated the opposition nominee and former finance minister Yashwant Sinha, by getting more than 50 per cent of the votes.

She will take the oath of office on Monday when President Ram Nath Kovind's term ends.

Mr Modi, opposition leader Rahul Gandhi and Mr Sinha congratulated Ms Murmu – who is from the Santhal tribe – on her appointment.

"Her early struggles, her rich service and her exemplary success motivate each and every Indian. She has emerged as a ray of hope for our citizens, especially the poor, marginalised and the downtrodden," Mr Modi wrote on Twitter yesterday.

"Her record victory augurs well for our democracy," he added.

"I am certain she will be an outstanding president who will lead from the front and strengthen India's development journey."

Ms Murmu's election was a foregone conclusion because Mr Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party and its allies had the numbers needed to push her candidacy through.

India's president is elected by the members of both houses of Parliament and of the legislative assemblies of states and federally administered regions.

Ms Murmu, 64, from the eastern



Art school students working on paintings of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) presidential candidate Droupadi Murmu in Mumbai yesterday. Ms Murmu's election was a foregone conclusion because Prime Minister Narendra Modi's BJP and its allies had the numbers needed to push her candidacy through. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

state of Odisha, is a former school teacher who joined local politics in her home state and rose through the ranks.

She was the governor of Jharkhand

state before being nominated to the post of president.

She is only the second woman to hold the office in the South Asian nation.

The first woman Indian president was Ms Pratibha Patil who served from 2007 to 2012.

Although the post is largely ceremonial, the president is the

supreme commander of the armed forces.

The job takes on additional significance in the event of a hung Parliament, when it falls on the president

to call on the party most likely to be able to cobble together a majority to form the government.

BLOOMBERG, AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

WHO to decide if monkeypox is now global health emergency

GENEVA • The World Health Organisation (WHO) reconvened its expert monkeypox committee yesterday to decide whether the outbreak now constitutes a global health emergency – the highest alarm it can sound.

A second meeting of the WHO's emergency committee on the virus was held to examine evidence on the worsening situation, with

more than 14,000 cases reported from 71 countries this year.

A surge in monkeypox infections has been reported since early May outside the West and Central African countries where the disease has long been endemic.

On June 23, the WHO convened an emergency committee of experts to decide if monkeypox constitutes a so-called Public Health

Emergency of International Concern – the UN health agency's highest alert level.

But a majority advised WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus that the situation, at that point, had not met the threshold.

A second meeting has now been held, with case numbers rising and the virus spreading to six more countries in the past week.

If the committee advises Dr Tedros that the outbreak constitutes a global health emergency, it will propose temporary recommendations on how to better prevent and reduce the spread of the disease and manage the global public health response.

But there is no timetable for when the outcome will be made public.

Speaking at the opening of the emergency committee meeting yesterday, Dr Tedros said: "I remain concerned about the number of cases, in an increasing number of countries, that have been reported to WHO." He added: "I am

acutely aware that any decision I take regarding the possible determination of a Public Health Emergency of International Concern involves the consideration of many factors, with the ultimate goal of protecting public health."

Dr Rosamund Lewis, the WHO's technical lead for monkeypox, told a press conference on Wednesday that 98 per cent of reported cases "are among men who have sex with men (MSM) – and primarily those who have multiple recent anonymous or new partners". She said they are typically of young age and chiefly in urban areas, according to the WHO.

Regardless of the committee's decision on the alert level, the "WHO will continue to do everything we can to support countries to stop transmission and save lives", Dr Tedros told the press conference on Wednesday.

"That's why WHO is continuing to work with patients and community advocates to develop and deliver information tailored to the af-

fect communities," Dr Tedros said.

WHO emergencies director Michael Ryan said the LGBTQ community was one of the most engaged and responsible, having worked hard over decades to combat HIV, "so therefore we have full confidence that this community can and will (engage), and is engaging very closely".

A viral infection resembling smallpox and first detected in humans in 1970, monkeypox is less dangerous and contagious than smallpox, which was eradicated in 1980.

Thailand's Health Ministry yesterday confirmed the country's first monkeypox infection in a 27-year-old Nigerian national in the southern island of Phuket.

Singapore's Ministry of Health last Friday reported the third local case of monkeypox, bringing the total number of cases reported here to six.

The latest patient is a 41-year-old male Singaporean.

In Germany, its vaccine advisory committee yesterday said it urgently recommended that the country use all the monkeypox vaccine it has on hand to administer first doses, and that second shots be offered only when enough doses are available.

"To mitigate the current wave of infection, slow the spread of monkeypox and eventually end the outbreak, a high vaccination coverage of the indication groups is needed," the committee said in a statement.

Germany has recorded some 2,110 cases of monkeypox so far, the committee said.

Meanwhile, the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention has been given authority to declare public health emergencies, which will help the agency to mobilise money and other resources.

The continent has reported 2,031 suspected cases of monkeypox in 10 countries.

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Not known yet if asymptomatic monkeypox cases can spread virus

Joyce Teo
Senior Health Correspondent

With more than 14,000 monkeypox cases reported in over 70 countries and territories since May, the World Health Organisation (WHO) held an emergency meeting yesterday to decide whether the outbreak constitutes what it calls a public health emergency of international concern.

Five deaths, all in Africa, have been reported in this outbreak.

Singapore now has six cases, of which three are local. None of them is linked.

Associate Professor Hsu Li Yang, an infectious diseases expert at the National University of Singapore's Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, said the outbreak here has not been controlled yet.

"The silver lining is that the number of cases remains very small, with new cases popping up sporadically," Prof Hsu added.

Monkeypox is endemic in Central and West Africa, but it is now spreading mostly in Europe, and in

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networks of men who have sex with men.

Cases have been picked up at sexual health clinics overseas.

Here, the Department of Sexually Transmitted Infections Control clinic, run by the National Skin Centre (NSC), has seen one confirmed case, said Professor Roy Chan, a senior consultant and medical adviser at NSC.

Q What symptoms do monkeypox patients have?

A Symptoms include fever, body ache and a rash. Associate Professor Lim Poh Lian, director of the high-level isolation unit at the National Centre for Infectious Dis-

eases, said the rash may start out as a small pimple in parts of the body that do not usually get pimples, like the genital area, but over a few days, these develop into blisters. Some patients also get swollen lymph glands in the groin, Prof Lim added.

The disease can be painful. In the United States, there have been reports of painful lesions in the anus, genitals and mouth.

In a July 15 release from the WHO office in Europe, a patient said he first fell ill with fever, and then his lymph nodes felt achy, very painful and swollen.

Initially, one blister appeared on his nose. It then got bigger and more painful, and he also had lesions in his throat.

He was put on heavy painkillers, and antibiotics because of a secondary bacterial infection, and fed through an intravenous drip.

Q Can monkeypox be transmitted asymptotically?

A Prof Hsu said: "We don't know as yet, but asymptomatic cases of monkeypox have been described during this outbreak, which is

novel in the sense that we had previously assumed that virtually all monkeypox cases would have symptoms and the rash."

The extent of asymptomatic cases and whether they can spread the virus are still unknown, he added.

Prof Lim said: "We never say never in medicine, but most monkeypox cases are spread by close skin-to-skin contact and through contaminated bedding."

"We should be aware of all the ways monkeypox can spread, but it is helpful to focus on what the current evidence shows us, which is (that it is) mainly spread by symptomatic cases through intimate contact."

Q What can I expect if I contract monkeypox?

A Most cases recover well.

Prof Lim said the fever usually lasts two to three days, and is generally mild. New skin blisters will continue to develop over a week or so, then take two weeks to dry up, and for the scabs to fall off and for new healthy skin to form, she said.

"The scabs are infectious, so the in-



A patient in the United States who has recovered from monkeypox showing scars on his skin from rashes caused by the disease. Other monkeypox symptoms include fever and body ache. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

fectious period – when the individual has to remain in isolation to prevent spread of infection to others – is likely to be three weeks or more."

Young children, pregnant women and persons with weakened immune symptoms may experience more severe disease. There have been overseas reports of cases requiring intensive care but those remain very rare.

Generally, no specific anti-viral treatment is needed for mild cases, said Prof Lim. "However, we do have anti-viral medications, such as cidofovir... Such medications

have known risks so we would use them only if the patient's clinical condition warrants it."

Q Are there any vaccines for monkeypox?

A Smallpox vaccines are being used as the monkeypox virus is closely related to the virus that causes smallpox. In the US, the Food and Drug Administration has licensed two vaccines – Jynneos and Acam2000 – for use against monkeypox.

joyceteo@sph.com.sg