



HALAL STATUS. Muslim women ride a motorbike past a coronavirus-themed mural in Jakarta, Indonesia. Writings on the mural read "Let's fight coronavirus together." As companies race to develop a COVID-19 vaccine and countries scramble to secure doses, questions about the use of pork products — banned by some religious groups — has raised concerns about the possibility of disrupted immunization campaigns. (AP Photo/Tatan Syuflana)

Concern among Muslims over halal status of COVID-19 vaccine

By Victoria Milko
AP Science Writer

JAKARTA, Indonesia — In October, Indonesian diplomats and Muslim clerics stepped off a plane in China. While the diplomats were there to finalize deals to ensure millions of doses of COVID-19 vaccine reached Indonesian citizens, the clerics had a much different concern: Whether the vaccine was permissible for use under Islamic law.

As companies race to develop a COVID-19 vaccine and countries scramble to secure doses, questions about the use of pork products — banned by some religious groups — has raised concerns about the possibility of disrupted immunization campaigns.

Pork-derived gelatin has been widely used as a stabilizer to ensure vaccines remain safe and effective during storage and transport. Some companies have worked for years to develop pork-free vaccines: Swiss pharmaceutical company Novartis has produced a pork-free meningitis vaccine, while Saudi- and Malaysia-based AJ Pharma is currently working on one of their own.

But demand, existing supply chains, cost, and the shorter shelf life of vaccines not containing porcine gelatin means the ingredient is likely to continue to be used in a majority of vaccines for years, said Dr. Salman Waqar, general secretary of the British Islamic Medical Association.

Spokespeople for Pfizer, Moderna, and AstraZeneca have said that pork products are not part of their COVID-19 vaccines. But limited supply and preexisting deals worth millions of dollars with other companies means that some countries with large Muslim populations, such as Indonesia, will receive vaccines that have not yet been certified to be gelatin-free.

This presents a dilemma for religious communities, including Orthodox Jews and Muslims, where the consumption of pork products is deemed religiously unclean, and how the ban is applied to medicine, he said.

"There's a difference of opinion amongst Islamic scholars as to whether you take something like pork gelatin and make it undergo a rigorous chemical transformation," Waqar said. "Is that still considered to be religiously impure for you to take?"

The majority consensus from past debates over pork gelatin use in vaccines is that it is permissible under Islamic law, as "greater harm" would occur if the vaccines

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U.S. bans second Malaysian palm oil giant over forced labor

By Margie Mason and Robin McDowell
The Associated Press

The U.S. said it will ban all shipments of palm oil from one of the world's biggest producers after finding indicators of forced labor and other abuses on plantations that feed into the supply chains of some of America's most famous food and cosmetic companies.

The order against Malaysian-owned Sime Darby Plantation Berhad and its local subsidiaries, joint ventures, and affiliates followed an intensive months-long investigation by the U.S. Customs and Border Protection's Office of Trade, said Ana Hinojosa, one of the agency's executive directors.

Hinojosa said the investigation "reasonably indicates" abuses against workers that included physical and sexual violence, restriction of movement, intimidation and threats, debt bondage, withholding of wages, and excessive overtime. Some of the problems appeared to be systemic, occurring on numerous plantations, which stretch across wide swaths of the country, she said.

"Importers should know that there are reputational, financial, and legal risks associated with importing goods made by forced labor into the United States," Hinojosa said in a telephone press briefing.

The order was announced just three months after the federal government slapped the same ban on another Malaysian palm oil giant, FGV Holdings Berhad — the first palm oil company ever targeted by Customs over concerns about forced labor. The U.S. imported \$410 million of crude palm oil from Malaysia in fiscal year 2020, representing a third of the total value shipped in.

The bans, triggered by petitions filed by nonprofit groups and a law firm, came in the wake of an in-depth investigation by The Associated Press into labor abuses on plantations in Malaysia and neighboring Indonesia, which together produce about 85% of the \$65-billion supply of the world's most consumed vegetable oil. Palm oil can be found in roughly half the products on supermarket shelves and in most cosmetic brands. It's in paints, plywood, pesticides, animal feed, biofuels, and even hand sanitizer.

The AP interviewed more than 130 current and former workers from two dozen palm oil companies, including Sime Darby, for its investigation. Reporters found everything from rape and child labor to trafficking and outright slavery on plantations in both countries.

Earlier in December, 25 Democratic lawmakers from the U.S. House Ways and Means Committee cited AP's investigation in a letter calling for the government to come down harder on the palm-oil industry in Malaysia and Indonesia, asking Customs and Border Protection if it had considered a blanket ban on imports from those countries.

"In our view, these odious labor practices and their pervasive impact across supply chains highlight the need for an aggressive and effective enforcement strategy," the letter said.

Sime Darby, which did not immediately comment, has



TROUBLING ORIGINS. Ranging in age from six to 102, women in a family who have worked on a palm-oil plantation for five generations hold out the palms of their hands in Malaysia. Like many laborers, they cannot afford to give up the company's basic subsidized housing, creating a generational cycle that helps ensure a cheap, built-in labor force. (AP Photo)

palm-oil plantations covering nearly 1.5 million acres, making it one of Malaysia's largest producers. It supplies to some of the biggest names in the business, from Cargill to Nestle, Unilever and L'Oréal, according to the companies' most recently published supplier and palm-oil mill lists.

Hinojosa said the agency's decision to issue the ban should send an "unambiguous" message to the trade community.

"Consumers have a right to know where the palm oil is coming from and the conditions under which that palm oil is produced and what products that particular palm oil is going into," she said.

Meanwhile, Duncan Jepson of the anti-trafficking group Liberty Shared, which submitted the petition leading to the Sime Darby ban, filed two additional complaints — one to the UK's Home Office, questioning the company's disclosure about its protection of human rights under the country's Modern Slavery Act, and the other to the Malaysian stock exchange, regarding the company's stated commitments to sustainability. Both complaints questioned the accuracy of Sime Darby's disclosures in light of the CPB's findings.

Jepson said the U.S. ban also should be a red flag for Asian and western financial institutions that have helped support the industry, saying ties to forced labor could have serious consequences for banks and lenders.

The U.S. government's announcement about Sime Darby marked the 14th time in 2020 that Customs has issued an order to detain shipments from an array of sectors following similar investigations into forced labor. They include seafood and cotton, along with human hair pieces believed to have been made by persecuted Uighur Muslims in Chinese labor camps.

Under last month's order, palm-oil products or derivatives traceable to Sime Darby will be detained at U.S. ports. Shipments can be exported if the company is unable to prove that the goods were not produced with forced labor.

Vaccination gives us hope the pandemic will end

But in the meantime, we need to continue safety measures to keep the virus from spreading:

- Wear a mask
- Physically distance from others
- Wash your hands
- Avoid gatherings
- Stay home when you're sick



For more information visit healthoregon.org/coronavirus or call 211

Oregon Health Authority

Indian shepherd combats water scarcity by building ponds

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(\$67,500) for the further development of watersheds in the area.

Venkatesh noted that every rainy season, tanks built by Kamegowda become filled with water, and serve as reservoirs for birds and other forest animals during the summer.

"He is a very dedicated man, a very selfless servant for the protection of the environment and ecology. In fact, he is a role model to other people in watershed development," Venkatesh said. "He is doing very good work."

"One Good Thing" is a series that highlights glimmers of joy in hard times — stories of people who find a way to make a difference, no matter how small.

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