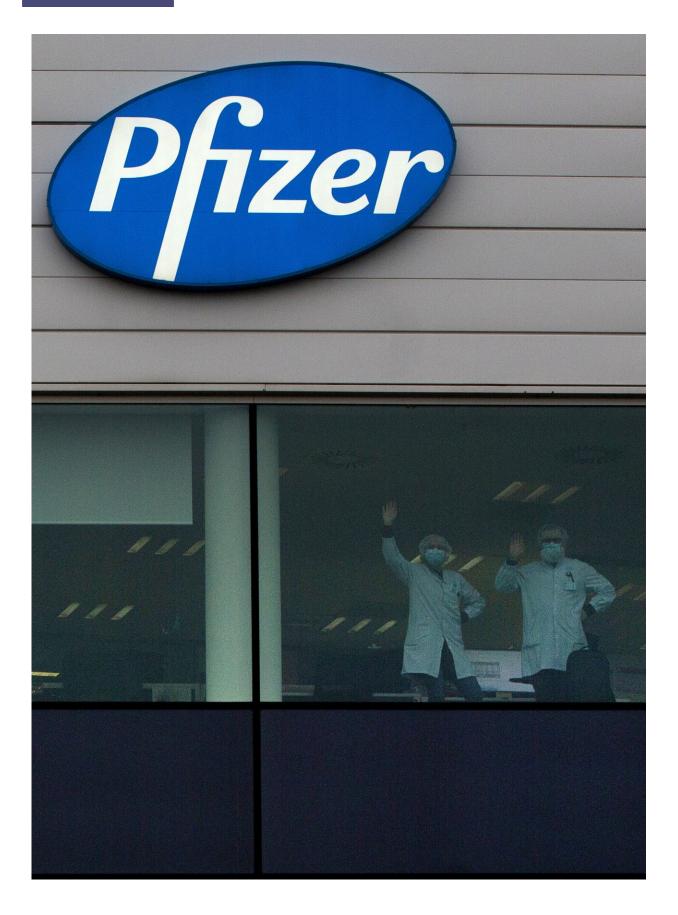# Phishing ploy targets COVID-19 vaccine distribution effort

December 3 2020, by Frank Bajak

Two workers wave from a window at Pfizer Manufacturing in Puurs, Belgium, on Wednesday, Dec. 2, 2020. British officials authorized a COVID-19 vaccine for emergency use on Wednesday, greenlighting the world's first shot against the virus that's backed by rigorous science and taking a major step toward eventually ending the pandemic. (AP Photo/Virginia Mayo)

IBM security researchers say they have detected a cyberespionage effort using targeted phishing emails to try to collect vital information on the World Health Organization's initiative for distributing COVID-19 vaccine to developing countries.

The researchers said they could not be sure who was behind the campaign, which began in September, or if it was successful. But the precision targeting and careful efforts to leave no tracks bore "the potential hallmarks of nation-state tradecraft," they said in "cold chain" needed to ensure coronavirus vaccines get the nonstop sterile refrigeration they need to be effective for the nearly 3 billion people who live where temperature-controlled storage is insufficient, IBM said.

"Think of it as the bloodline that will be supplying the most vital vaccines globally," said Claire Zaboeva, an IBM analyst involved in the detection.

The U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency later Microsoft said it had detected mostly unsuccessful attempts by state-backed Russian and North Korean hackers to steal data from leading pharmaceutical companies and vaccine researchers. It gave no information on how many succeeded or how serious those breaches were. Chinese state-backed hackers have also targeted vaccine makers, the U.S. government said in announcing criminal charges in July.

A refrigerated truck drives out of the Pfizer Manufacturing plant in Puurs, Belgium, on Thursday, Dec. 3, 2020. British officials on Wednesday authorized a COVID-19 vaccine for emergency use, greenlighting the world's first shot against the virus that's backed by rigorous science and taking a major step toward eventually ending the pandemic. (AP Photo/Virginia Mayo)

An employee, wearing a protective face mask, checks boxes at Pfizer Manufacturing plant in Puurs, Belgium, on Thursday, Dec. 3, 2020. British officials on Wednesday authorized a COVID-19 vaccine for emergency use, greenlighting the world's first shot against the virus that's backed by rigorous science and taking a major step toward eventually ending the pandemic. (AP Photo/Virginia Mayo)

Microsoft said most of the targets—located in Canada, France, India, South Korea and the United States—were researching vaccines and COVID-19 treatments. It did not name the targets.

On Wednesday, Britain became the first to country to authorize a rigorously tested COVID-19 vaccine, the one developed by American

drugmaker Pfizer and Germany's BioNTech.

Other countries aren't far behind: Regulators not only in the U.S. but in the European Union and Canada also are vetting the Pfizer vaccine along with a shot made by Moderna Inc. British and Canadian regulators are also considering a vaccine made by AstraZeneca and Oxford University.

The logistical challenges of distributing vaccines globally are huge. The Pfizer-BioNTech one must be stored and shipped at ultra-cold temperatures of around minus 70 degrees Celsius (minus 94 degrees Fahrenheit).

Unlike the Moderna and Pfizer COVID-19 vaccines, Johnson & Johnson's requires refrigeration but does not need to be frozen.