

CORONAVIRUS

No time for complacency

Says WHO as cases drop in China

REUTERS, Geneva

A continued decline in the number of new cases of coronavirus infections in China is encouraging, the World Health Organization said yesterday, but it is too early to know if this trend will continue.

"We are encouraged by this trend but this is no time for complacency," the WHO's director general, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, told a briefing in Geneva.

He also noted that the number of coronavirus cases in the rest of world was very low compared inside China, but added: "That may not stay the same for very long".

The latest cases reported by South Korea are from "several distinct clusters", Oliver Morgan, the WHO's director of health emergency information and risk assessment, told the briefing.

"The number seems quite high, (but they are) mostly linked to existing outbreak," he said. "That doesn't signal a particular change in global epidemiology."



Members of Syria's opposition National Liberation Front fire a rocket at a position near the village of al-Nayrab, about 14 kilometres southeast of the city of Idlib in northwestern Syria, amid clashes with government forces, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

No relent in fighting in Idlib

Civilians suffer as Russia-Turkey talks bring no results

REUTERS, Azaz, Syria/Ankara

Russian warplanes struck at rebel-held towns in northwest Syria again yesterday and Turkish artillery supported insurgent attacks elsewhere as officials from the two countries struggled to reach a compromise to halt an escalation in the Syrian war.

In Geneva, the United Nations refugee chief called for a halt to the fighting to allow hundreds of thousands of trapped civilians to move to places of safety.

Syrian troops backed by Russian forces have been battling since December to eradicate the last rebel bastions in Idlib and Aleppo provinces in what could be one of the final chapters of the nine-year-old civil war.

But Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan on Wednesday threatened to launch a military operation against the government forces unless they pulled back, and Turkish troops and weaponry have already massed inside Syria.

Talks between Ankara, which supports some rebel factions, and Moscow to avert a wider war and a

possible direct confrontation have struggled to make progress.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said there had been some rapprochement with Russia in the talks but they were still not at the desired levels. Ankara and Moscow have accused each other of flouting a 2018 de-escalation agreement that allowed Turkey and Russia to set up observation posts in Idlib.

Turkey has said some of its posts in Idlib were surrounded by Syrian government forces.

Residents and relief staff said Russian warplanes yesterday resumed attacks on the towns of Darat Izza and Atareb in the northern corner of Aleppo province, where Turkish troops have set up a line of defence to thwart further advances by the Syrian army and allied Iranian militias.

In Idlib province, Turkish artillery provided cover fire for renewed rebel attacks on Nairab and the strategic crossroads town of Saraqeb, according to rebels and residents.

Meanwhile there was no end in sight

for the misery of the nearly one million people - most of them women and children - who have fled the fighting to seek sanctuary in the border area.

The exodus has overwhelmed relief agencies but Turkey, which is struggling to cope with the 3.7 million Syrian refugees already camped inside its borders, says it can take no more.

Families are sleeping outside by roads and in olive groves, burning garbage to stay warm. Some children have died from the cold. Some have already been displaced more than once after fleeing battles in other parts of Syria earlier in the conflict.

The UN humanitarian affairs agency (OCHA) said the crisis had reached a horrifying level, with more and more displaced people crammed into a small pocket of Idlib.

More than 300 people, many of them women and children, had been killed in Idlib and Aleppo due to the hostilities since the start of the year, it said. Indiscriminate attacks had damaged or destroyed hospitals, schools and other civilian sites.



Thousands of women hold green scarves demanding the the decriminalization of abortion, in Argentina, in Buenos Aires, on Wednesday. Abortion in Argentina is allowed only in cases of rape, or if the mother's health is in danger. The green scarves are a symbol of the women's fight to legalize abortion.

PHOTO: AFP

Democrats bare fangs at Bloomberg in fiery debate

AFP, Las Vegas

Former New York mayor Michael Bloomberg endured a punishing assault in his debut Democratic presidential debate Wednesday from rivals who savaged him for parachuting in late and throwing astronomical amounts of money at the race.

The Las Vegas showdown came at a tense time in the party's nomination race, with leftist firebrand Bernie Sanders coalescing as the frontrunner and some challengers fighting for survival.

US media magnate Bloomberg found himself targeted from the start, as candidates from Sanders to former vice president Joe Biden impugned the man whose sudden prominence in polling has scrambled the race to defeat President Donald Trump.

"Understand this: Democrats take a huge risk if we just substitute one arrogant billionaire for another," Senator Elizabeth Warren said in a

fiery attack on Bloomberg.

"Democrats are not going to win if we have a nominee who has a history of hiding his tax returns, of harassing women, and of supporting racist policies," she added.

Sanders hit Bloomberg hard on his vast wealth at a time of "grotesque" income inequality in America.

"Mike Bloomberg owns more wealth than the bottom 125 million Americans," Sanders said in one of the night's many abrasive moments. "That's immoral."

All eyes were on Bloomberg's first appearance on the debate stage after spending hundreds of millions of dollars on campaign advertising.

He endured a very public vetting and struggled to highlight his roles as problem solver, businessman, city manager and philanthropist.

He found himself on the defensive when pressed to explain sexual harassment claims against him and

employees, his delay in releasing his taxes and more.

Political analyst Aaron Kall of the University of Michigan said Bloomberg proved "really weak" in the face of the onslaught.

Bloomberg at one point managed to push back forcefully against Sanders, saying if the self-declared democratic socialist is the nominee, "we will have Donald Trump for another four years."

But Trump himself was dismissive of Bloomberg's performance onstage.

"He was stumbling, bumbling and grossly incompetent. If this doesn't knock him out of the race, nothing will," the president tweeted.

A Washington Post-ABC News poll out Wednesday showed Sanders with a commanding double-digit lead nationally, at 32 percent. Sagging former frontrunner Biden was second at 16 percent, followed by Bloomberg at 14 and Warren at 12.

COMBATING SPREAD OF CORONAVIRUS

Conspiracy theories hurting efforts: China

REUTERS, Shanghai

An outbreak of disinformation in China and elsewhere has hurt global efforts to combat the new coronavirus, said a specialist infectious disease lab located at the epicentre of the epidemic -- and at the heart of a number of conspiracy theories.

In a statement issued on Wednesday, the state-backed Wuhan Institute of Virology said "internet rumours" had "received close attention from all walks of life" and "caused great harm to our research staff on the front line of scientific research".

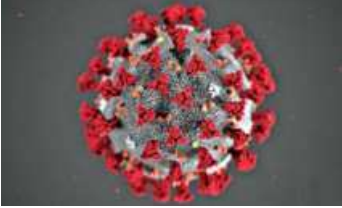
The institute has been accused of "artificially synthesising" the coronavirus in one of its laboratories, it said. It also referred to other claims circulating online that the "patient zero" in the current outbreak was a graduate student from the institute, and that one of its researchers had also died after the virus "leaked".

Many of the rumours circulated domestically and overseas claim the coronavirus was engineered by local scientists and leaked, deliberately or by accident, in Wuhan where the virus was first detected and is the epicentre of the epidemic.

But another theory, debunked on Wednesday by the well-known rumour-busting website Snopes.com, connected the outbreak to the arrest last month of Harvard University professor Charles Lieber, who was accused of concealing ties with the Wuhan Institute of Technology.

Shanghai government newspaper Liberation Daily has published a regular round-up of misinformation, including allegations that large numbers of infected patients are coming to the city for treatment, and a claim the virus can be cured by strong curry.

A team of 27 scientists published a statement in the Lancet medical journal on Tuesday condemning the conspiracy theories, which "do nothing but create fear, rumours and prejudice that jeopardise our global collaboration in the fight against this virus." They said scientists "overwhelmingly conclude that this coronavirus originated in wildlife" and transmitted to humans from a seafood market in Wuhan.



Japan firm lands massive Sri Lanka airport contract

A Japanese firm was chosen by Colombo yesterday to build a new \$570 million terminal for Sri Lanka's main airport, as Tokyo re-emerges as a key infrastructure backer amid a raft of Chinese projects. The cabinet announced the Taisei Corporation was picked to develop the Japanese-funded project, with the new terminal expected to double capacity at Bandaranaike International airport to around 20 million passengers a year. The decision follows the financing of Colombo's planned \$1.5-billion light rail system last year by Japan's overseas development agency -- the biggest single foreign investment in the island nation.

Lesotho PM to be charged with murder of ex-wife

Lesotho Prime Minister Thomas Thabane is expected today to be charged with the murder of his estranged wife, who was gunned down two days before his inauguration in 2017, police said yesterday. The news came as Thabane announced he would step down on July 31, following pressure from his party to quit over the scandal. Lilopelo Thabane, 58, was killed in June 2017 by unknown assailants on the outskirts of the capital Maseru, two days before the premier, now aged 80, took office. The couple had been embroiled in bitter divorce proceedings when Lilopelo was murdered in front of her home in the capital Maseru. Her death shook the tiny mountainous kingdom of Lesotho, which is entirely surrounded by South Africa.

Silicon Valley inventor of 'cut, copy and paste' dies



Silicon Valley on Wednesday was mourning a pioneering computer scientist whose accomplishments included inventing the widely relied on "cut, copy and paste" command. Bronx-born Lawrence "Larry" Tesler died this week at age 74, according to Xerox, where he spent part of his career. "The inventor of cut/copy & paste, find & replace, and more was former Xerox researcher Larry Tesler," the company tweeted. "Your workday is easier thanks to his revolutionary ideas. Larry passed away Monday, so please join us in celebrating him." A graduate of Stanford University, Tesler specialized in human-computer interaction, employing his skills at Amazon, Apple, Yahoo, and the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center (PARC).

Sweden creates \$1m prizes for sustainable food solutions

Sweden has created two \$1 million prizes for solutions to feed billions of people, as climate change threatens the world's food supply and a growing population requires sustainable food systems, organisers said yesterday. The world's population, currently at 7.8 billion, is expected to grow to close to 10 billion by 2050. Feeding a population of that size will be possible only through transforming eating habits, improving food production and reducing food waste, experts say. Eradicating hunger by 2030 is one of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. The first prizes will be awarded "later in 2020", organisers said.

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