

NEWS IN
briefTrump names Meadows
as fourth chief of staff

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump announced Friday he had chosen staunch ally Mark Meadows to be his new chief of staff -- the fourth person to hold the position since he took office. Meadows, a Republican congressman from North Carolina, will replace the ultra-conservative Mick Mulvaney, who had been serving as acting chief of staff since Trump fired John Kelly in December 2018. "I have known and worked with Mark, and the relationship is a very good one," Trump tweeted, making the announcement.

Pope cancels main
appearances in public

REUTERS, Vatican City

Pope Francis has cancelled his regular appearances in public to avoid crowds gathering to see him and will stream them on the internet from inside the Vatican because of the coronavirus outbreak in Italy. The Vatican said that the pontiff will not address crowds today from a window overlooking St. Peter's Square, and will also not hold his general audience from there this Wednesday.

Hotel collapse traps
70 in eastern China

AFP, Beijing

Around 70 people were trapped after a hotel collapsed in China's eastern Fujian province yesterday evening, officials said. Xinjia Hotel collapsed around 7:30 pm (11:30 GMT) and around 23 people had been rescued by 9:00 pm, according to a Quanzhou city government statement. The 80-room hotel was recently converted to a quarantine facility for people who had recent contact with coronavirus patients, the People's Daily state newspaper reported. State news agency Xinhua said rescue efforts were ongoing.

Cruise ship off US confirms 21 cases

Thousands of passengers, crew in quarantine; more than half of the 50 US states now have virus; Florida confirms two deaths taking the country's death toll to 17

AGENCIES

Twenty-one people aboard a cruise ship that was barred from docking in San Francisco have tested positive for coronavirus, US officials said on Friday, as eight more states reported their first cases of the fast-spreading respiratory disease.

Vice President Mike Pence, who is running the White House's response to the outbreak, said at a news conference that 19 crew members and two passengers out of 46 people tested so far on the Grand Princess ship had the virus.

He said the vessel with about 3,500 passengers and crew would be taken to

CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK

Italy calls in retired doctors to
help fight virus

Iran's death toll jumps to 145

China reports lowest number
of new cases in weeks

a non-commercial port where everyone on board would be tested.

US President Donald Trump said he would rather have passengers remain on board the vessel, but that he would let others decide if they can disembark.

"I'd rather have them stay on, personally, but I fully understand if they want to take them off," Trump told reporters after touring the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta.

Allowing passengers onto US soil who might be infected would push up the number of coronavirus cases in the country, he said.

"I don't need to have the numbers double because of one ship that wasn't our fault," Trump said.

Keeping passengers quarantined aboard a coronavirus-hit ship proved to be a disastrous strategy in Japan, leading to one of the world's biggest outbreaks, reports Reuters.

On Friday, eight states - Pennsylvania, Indiana, Minnesota, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Nebraska, South Carolina and Hawaii - reported their first cases, meaning more than half of the 50 US states now have the virus.



Florida confirmed Friday two deaths from the virus -- the first US fatalities outside the west coast states of Washington and California -- taking the country's death toll to 17, reports AFP.

In Seattle, the epicenter of the nation's outbreak, there were school closures and orders to work from home. In areas less affected by the outbreak, music festivals and sports events were cancelled or curtailed as a precaution.

Dollar bills from China are going

into quarantine due to the epidemic, as the Federal Reserve is putting extra precautions on money coming into the US.

Italy yesterday began recruiting retired doctors as part of urgent efforts to bolster the healthcare system with 20,000 additional staff and fight the escalating viral epidemic as death toll rises to 197.

Colombia declared its first case on Friday after a 19-year-old woman arriving from Italy tested positive for the

virus, the health ministry said.

The United Nations on Friday asked nine countries, including China, South Korea and France, to delay by three months the rotations of their UN peacekeeping forces due to the coronavirus outbreak.

Iran yesterday reported 21 new deaths and 1,076 fresh cases in the past 24 hours, bringing the overall tolls to 145 dead and 5,823 infected.

An Iranian lawmaker died from coronavirus, state news agency IRNA reported, one of several officials to succumb to the illness in the epidemic-hit country.

Saudi Arabia yesterday reopened the area around the sacred Kaaba in Makkah's Grand Mosque, reversing one of a series of measures introduced to combat the outbreak.

In China, the number of new cases reported yesterday nationwide was the lowest in weeks.

The Chinese government has hinted it may soon lift the quarantine imposed on Hubei province -- the locked-down epicentre where some 56 million people have been effectively housebound since late January.

'It's pandemonium'

Panic-buying hits Los Angeles despite officials' pleas for restraint

AFP, Los Angeles

Sprinting shoppers, rationed mineral water and not a roll of toilet paper to be seen: panic-buying sparked by the new coronavirus soared in Los Angeles this week.

Two days after California declared a statewide emergency, wholesale stores visited by AFP on Friday were unable to keep up with soaring demand for a range of staple items, as citizens prepare for the worst.

"It's pandemonium -- our numbers are double the usual," said Rene, an employee at a Costco supermarket in Burbank.

"Today has been out of control. That's why we're out of toilet paper, out of almost all water, out of hand sanitizer."

One person has died so far in California, which as of Friday had registered 69 coronavirus cases -- second in the US only to nearby Washington state.

Despite officials' pleas for restraint, Californians have begun emulating the panic-buying seen across swathes of Asia and other regions.

"It's been nuts," Costco CFO Richard Galanti told analysts on a call Thursday.

The same day, police in San Bernardino County, near Los Angeles, were called to one store after customers became enraged by the lack of supplies.

On Friday, Costco shoppers were restricted to two crates of water, down from four the previous day.

Several tried to ignore the rule and saw their extra waters confiscated at checkout, leading to "some pushing, a little bit," an attendant said.

A worker wheeling an overloaded cart of confiscated bottles back to their shelf was repeatedly stopped by new customers grabbing what they could.

Even Costco's famous free food samples had been suspended for fear of spreading the virus, another employee confirmed.

"With the madness here, it's starting to really set in," said Lisa Garcia, a 30-year-old retail worker who admitted she was growing seriously worried.

"We were thinking of stocking up on paper products, but look at those empty shelves!" she told AFP.

At another nearby branch, employees reported shoppers dashing at full pace through the doors as the store opened, desperate to grab supplies.

By midday, only expensive sparkling Perrier bottles remained, to the disappointment of several shoppers.

But some shoppers, though concerned, managed to see the lighter side of the situation.

"I'm guarded," said emergency responder Andrew, who did not want to give his last name, wheeling a trolley filled with water, paper towels, limes and ginger ale.

S Korea's coronavirus cases
climb above 7,000

Most cases traced to church; death toll rises to 46

REUTERS, Seoul

South Korea's coronavirus cases jumped above 7,000 yesterday, up by 448 from the previous day, with more than half of the total number linked to a secretive church at the centre of the country's outbreak, health authorities said.

The death toll rose by two to 46, according to the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC).

Since mid-February when a woman tested positive after attending services at a branch of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus in the southeastern city of Daegu, the number of infections has exploded in South Korea, giving it the most cases outside China.

There are 7,041 cases in total including a new small cluster of cases reported yesterday at an apartment complex in Daegu, where some members of the church live, the KCDC said.

While 448 new cases remain a sizeable jump, it marked a third straight day of declines in the number of new cases for

South Korea.

"There is a possibility that new cases increase as tests are still underway," Kwon Jun-wook, deputy director at the KCDC told a briefing.

Lee Man-hee, the founder of the church, apologized on Monday calling the epidemic a "great calamity".

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom has voiced concerns over members of the Shincheonji Church being blamed for the spread of the coronavirus.

"We urge the South Korean government to condemn scapegoating and to respect religious freedom as it responds to the outbreak," it said on Twitter on Friday.

The large amount of infections in the country has prompted nearly 100 nations to impose curbs on travellers from South Korea.

On Friday, South Korea said it would suspend visas and visa waivers for Japan in response to Tokyo's travel restrictions on Koreans, as fears over the coronavirus reignited a feud between the neighbours dating back to before World War Two.

WHO appeals for \$20m
to fight Ebola in DRC

AFP, Geneva

The World Health Organization said Friday it needs \$20 million to fight Ebola in DR Congo, even as the end of the devastating 19-month epidemic finally seemed within grasp.

While the world's attention has been focused on the coronavirus, the last patient being treated for Ebola in the Democratic Republic of Congo was discharged on Tuesday.

If no more cases are diagnosed, the epidemic will officially end within 42 days from the date of the last confirmed patient's second negative test.

"The end of the outbreak will be declared on April 12" barring further cases, WHO assistant director-general for emergency response Ibrahim Soce Fall told the media in Geneva on Friday.

But he issued a note of warning, saying "it is critical to maintain surveillance and rapid response capacity" in order to quickly diagnose any new cases.

"We have over 1,169 survivors. So we have an important programme to continue to provide care to survivors, but also to make sure that we don't have any flare-ups," he added.

"We know that the focus is more now on COVID-19, but... we still need an additional \$20 million for WHO to maintain the team on the ground because Ebola is also a matter of global health security."

DR Congo's most recent Ebola outbreak was first identified in August 2018 and WHO declared it a "public health emergency of international concern" last July.

It has killed 2,264 people in DR Congo, the vast central African country's tenth Ebola epidemic since 1976.

It is the second-most deadly Ebola epidemic in history, after an outbreak killed more than 11,000 people in West Africa from 2013 to 2016.



A Greek fire fighter uses a water cannon as migrants gather on the Turkish-Greek border near Turkey's Pazarkule border crossing with Greece's Kastanies, in Edirne, Turkey yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

India makes u-turn on TV ban
over Delhi violence coverage

The Indian government backtracked yesterday after slapping a 48-hour ban on two TV channels for what officials called biased coverage of New Delhi violence. A blackout of Asianet News and MediaOne was ordered on Friday but lifted after an outcry from opposition groups and protests by the channels to the information and broadcasting ministry. Information minister Prakash Javadekar said Prime Minister Narendra Modi requested the ban be revoked on learning of it. "Our basic belief is that press freedom is essential in a democratic set-up," Javadekar told reporters when asked about the move. A government order had accused the channels of covering last month's deadly violence in the capital "in a manner that highlighted the attack on places of worship and siding towards a particular community".

Int'l tourist arrivals to drop
3% due to virus: UN

The number of international tourist arrivals is expected to drop sharply this year, the World Tourism Organization said Friday, reversing a previous forecast for a substantial increase. The United Nations' UNWTO said in a statement that arrivals were now projected to fall by 1.0-3.0 percent in 2020, instead of a previous forecast of growth of 3.0-4.0 percent. This will lead to an estimated loss of \$30-50 billion (29-45 billion euros) in international tourism receipts, the Madrid-based body said. If confirmed, this will be the first annual decline in the number of international tourist arrivals since 2009 when the global economic crisis hit the travel and tourism sector hard.

Space-grown lettuce is safe
to eat, says study

The astronauts floated around, expressing delight as they tasted something entirely unexpected in space. "Awesome! Tastes good! I like that! It's fresh!" they said, between bites of the "Outredgeous" red romaine lettuce. It was the first time astronauts were able to enjoy the fruits of their labour after growing produce from seeds and harvesting it. Ice cream was possible in space before fresh vegetables -- but in space, lettuce actually tastes like lettuce. The same can't be said for creamy delights. In the August 2015 video Nasa shared of the experience, US astronaut Scott Kelly, Kjell Lindgren and Japanese astronaut Kimiya Yui appear surprised as they munch on the leaves.

SOURCE: AFP, CNN

Taliban could 'possibly' seize
power after US leaves: Trump

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump on Friday said the Taliban could "possibly" overrun the Afghan government after the United States withdraws from the country, leaving the US-backed authorities to fend for themselves.

"Countries have to take care of themselves," Trump told reporters at the White House. "You can only hold someone's hand for so long."

Asked if the Taliban could eventually seize power, Trump said it's "not supposed to happen that way but it possibly will."

"We can't be there for the next 20 years. We've been there for 20 years and we've been protecting the country but we can't be there for the next -- eventually they're going to have to protect themselves," he said.

Trump said the Afghan government's ability to defend itself from the guerrillas after US forces pull out was unknown.

"I don't know. I can't answer that question," he said. "We'll have to see what happens."

Trump's comments came at a time when dozens of people were killed when gunmen opened fire at a political rally in Kabul on Friday.

The attack, claimed by the Islamic State group, highlights a glaring lack of security in the Afghan capital just 14 months ahead of the scheduled withdrawal of all foreign forces.

It also calls into question a key element of the US-Taliban deal signed February 29 -- whether the Taliban are capable of stopping jihadists such as IS from running amok in Afghanistan after US forces pull out.

In a statement, IS said two brothers had targeted a "gathering of apostates" with machine guns and grenades.

The gunmen inflicted devastating carnage at the crowded event in west Kabul, killing 32 people and wounding 58 others, health ministry spokesman Wahidullah Mayar told AFP.

Interior ministry spokesman Nasrat Rahimi put the toll at 29 dead, with an additional 61 wounded. He said special forces units had carried out clearance operations, eventually killing the two gunmen.

The assault occurred at a commemoration ceremony for Abdul Ali Mazari -- a politician from the Hazara ethnic group, most of whom are Shia Muslims.

Women account for quarter
of world's MPs: IPU study

AFP, Geneva

A quarter of all lawmakers serving in national parliaments worldwide are women, the International Parliamentary Union said Friday, warning though that progress towards gender parity was slowing amid significant "pushback".

In 2019, women accounted for 24.9 percent of parliamentarians worldwide, the IPU, which was founded in 1889 and is one of the world's oldest international organisations, said in a fresh report.

"There has been considerable progress" in recent years, IPU Secretary-General Martin Chungong told reporters in Geneva, pointing out that the percentage back in 1995 stood at just 11.3 percent.

"There has been a shift in the way people think," he said, pointing out that a quarter century ago the ambition was to get women to the 30-percent mark, while today "the idea of having 50-50 in parliament is the norm."

Four countries have reached full gender parity: Rwanda, Cuba, Bolivia and the United Arab Emirates.

Today, the Americas has the best gender

balance in parliament, counting 31.3 percent women MPs across the region, ahead of Europe which counts just under 30 percent.

The Pacific has the worst record on female representation in parliament, with only 19.4 percent, and three countries in this region -- Micronesia, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu -- have no women members of parliament at all.

Chungong warned that worldwide there was now clearly "a slowdown in the growth of women's parliamentary participation."

Last year, women's global representation in parliament grew by only 0.6 percent, after an already modest increase of 0.9 percent a year earlier.

"There seems to be pushback when it comes to women's political participation, and it is important that we push back against pushback," he said.

The IPU, a grouping of 178 legislative chambers that seeks to improve representative democracy worldwide, urged nations to redouble efforts towards gender parity by using tactics including carefully designed quotas.