

India closes border with Myanmar

Extends travel curbs

REUTERS, Mumbai

India ramped up travel restrictions and closed a border with neighbouring Myanmar to counter the coronavirus outbreak, as countries across South Asia reported a rise in cases yesterday.

The virus has hit Europe and the United States far harder than China's most immediate neighbours in South Asia, where no one has yet died. But as the number of cases in the region topped 80, experts fear that its overstretched medical systems may not be able to handle the type of intensive care required.

Indian suspended issuing visas to citizens of France, Spain and Germany until further notice, a health ministry statement said late on Tuesday. Such restrictions are already in place for citizens of China, Italy, Iran, Japan and South Korea - the five countries worst hit by the outbreak of the virus.

It also closed the border with its eastern neighbour Myanmar, although no cases have so far been confirmed there yet.

"As a precautionary measure (to prevent) transmission of Coronavirus/COVID-19, the international border with Myanmar has been closed... until further orders," N Biren Singh, chief minister of the north-eastern state of Manipur, which shares a border with Myanmar, said in a tweet on Tuesday.

India, which has confirmed 60 cases of the virus, advised citizens to avoid all non-essential travel to countries affected by the virus, and asked those returning from these places to self-quarantine at home.

The country's southern state of Kerala, which reported three new cases over the weekend, said on Tuesday it was shutting schools and movie theatres to avoid a further outbreak. Schools in at least two more states have also been closed.



This photo taken Tuesday shows a medical staff member cleaning the floor after all patients were discharged at a temporary hospital set up to treat people with the COVID-19 coronavirus in Wuhan in China's central Hubei province.

PHOTO: AFP

CORONAVIRUS CONTAINMENT SUCCESS IN CHINA

Time to go back to work

China tells people of virus epicenter as mammoth economy grinding back to life

REUTERS, Beijing/Shanghai

Some vital industries in Wuhan, the Chinese city at the epicentre of the coronavirus epidemic, were told they can resume work, a day after President Xi Jinping visited there for the first time since the outbreak began.

The city of 11 million has been in lockdown since late January but Xi's visit signalled the tide was turning in the government's favour as it fights to contain a virus that as of Tuesday had infected 80,778 people in China and killed 3,158.

Authorities elsewhere in China lowered emergency response levels to the epidemic and relaxed travel restrictions.

Drawing confidence from Xi's visit and falling new infections, the Hubei provincial government said public transport workers in Wuhan and those

engaged in making medical supplies and producing daily necessities would be allowed to return to work.

Other industries that impact national or global supply chains can also return to work with permission from relevant authorities, it said.

Wuhan accounts for nearly 10% of vehicles made in China and is home to hundreds of parts suppliers. Across the country, manufacturing is slowly returning to normal.

Though the economy is still operating at about 25% below its usual levels, activity should be fully restored by the end of April, Françoise Huang, senior economist at Euler Hermes, predicted in a note to clients.

On Wednesday, Japanese automaker Nissan said it planned to partially resume production at two Chinese plants, one of them in Hubei. Its

competitor Honda said that some employees had returned to work at its plant in Wuhan, and that it would gradually restart production from Wednesday.

While relaxing some restrictions, the Hubei government said curbs on transport in Wuhan would remain in place, and schools in the province would remain closed until further notice.

The city of Qianjiang in Hubei also bucked a wider loosening trend, with authorities saying they would retain strict transport bans.

Latest figures from the National Health Commission showed 24 new coronavirus cases nationwide, and 22 more deaths as of Tuesday. All the latest deaths occurred in Wuhan.

But new infections in Hubei continued to stabilise, with new cases declining for the sixth day. All 13 new

cases in Hubei were recorded in Wuhan.

The most encouraging trend to be taken from the latest infection figures was lower rate of transmission within communities in China, as 10 of Tuesday's 24 new cases involved people travelling from abroad.

But Chinese customs said downward pressure on China's foreign trade and the global economy is still increasing as the coronavirus epidemic is spreading quickly abroad.

While only 79 of the cases in China have come from abroad, the rising number of such incidences has prompted authorities to shift their focus on containing the risk of imported cases.

So far, about three-quarters of China's municipalities, regions and provinces have lowered their emergency response level from the highest tier.

Malaysia PM urges Mahathir to endorse new government

Malaysia's new Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin extended an olive branch to the leader he recently replaced, veteran politician Mahathir Mohamad, calling on him to endorse the new government after weeks of political tension. Muhyiddin, a former minister in Mahathir's cabinet, was later sworn in as prime minister on March 1, joining hands with the old ruling UMNO party - which lost a general election for the first time ever in 2018 - and the Islamist party PAS to form a new coalition. The call came after Mahathir yesterday conceded that he no longer commanded a majority in parliament and would not win a vote of no confidence in the new prime minister.

Parliament passes reforms allowing Putin to run again

Russia's lower house yesterday passed constitutional reforms in their final reading that include the possibility of President Vladimir Putin extending his rule for another two terms. A total of 383 State Duma lawmakers voted in favour of the package of constitutional amendments, with 43 abstentions and none against. The measures must now be approved by the upper house Federation Council and be put to a public vote scheduled for April 22. Putin announced the package of reforms in January, then repeatedly denied they were meant to extend his grip on power as he approaches the end of his fourth and final presidential term in 2024. However on Tuesday another amendment was introduced that would reset presidential terms, making it possible for Putin to run again if the constitutional court allows it.

Rare white giraffes killed by poachers in Kenya



Kenya's only female white giraffe and her calf have been killed by poachers, conservationists said Tuesday, in a major blow for the rare animals found nowhere else in the world. The bodies of the two giraffes were found "in a skeletal state after being killed by armed poachers" in Garissa in eastern Kenya, the Ishaqibini Hirola Community Conservancy said in a statement. Their deaths leave just one remaining white giraffe alive -- a lone male, borne by the same slaughtered female, the conservancy said. Their alabaster colour is caused not by albinism but a condition known as leucism, which means they continue to produce dark pigment in their soft tissue, giving them dark eyes.

SOURCE: AFP

Taliban reject Afghan offer to free 1,500 prisoners

Demand release of 5,000 captives before opening talks

AFP, Kabul

The Taliban yesterday rejected Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's offer to release 1,500 insurgent prisoners ahead of peace talks, saying it wanted 5,000 captives freed before opening negotiations.

Taliban political spokesman Suhail Shaheen told AFP the prisoners should be released "as a trust-building measure" before intra-Afghan talks.

Any changes amounted to a violation of the deal struck between the insurgents and Washington in Doha last month, he added.

Although Kabul was not a signatory to the deal, it stated that up to 5,000 Taliban prisoners held by Afghan authorities would be released, prompting an angry reaction from Ghani.

Shaheen's announcement came hours after Ghani issued a decree saying the government would release 1,500 captives starting Saturday -- but only if the insurgents cut violence.

Another 3,500 prisoners would be released after talks started, a spokesman

said on Twitter.

The announcement came hours after the US said its forces had started pulling out of two bases in Afghanistan, in line with a deal signed between Washington and the Taliban. US negotiator Zalmay Khalilzad welcomed the announcement and urged the Afghan government and the Taliban to meet "immediately" in Qatar to sort out prisoner details.

The State Department voiced confidence that Afghan peace talks would open soon, saying Ghani was speaking to rivals and would name a negotiating team "in the coming few days."

The UN Security Council on Tuesday endorsed the US-Taliban deal, a rare step for an agreement involving insurgents.

Under the US-Taliban deal, foreign forces will quit Afghanistan within 14 months, subject to Taliban security guarantees and the insurgents holding talks with Kabul.

The US is initially supposed to cut its troop presence from about 12,000 currently to 8,600 by mid-July, and close five of its roughly 20 bases across the country.



People attend a moment of silence at 2:46 pm (0546 GMT), the time when the magnitude 9.0 earthquake struck off Japan's coast in 2011, in Iwaki, Fukushima prefecture, Japan, in this photo taken yesterday by Kyodo, to mark the nine-year anniversary of the disaster.

PHOTO: REUTERS

MYANMAR PARLIAMENT



Bid to reduce military's power foiled

AFP, Naypyidaw

Myanmar's military on Tuesday quashed proposals in parliament that would mean its MPs relinquish power, in a vote pitting the armed forces in open opposition against Aung San Suu Kyi as elections loom.

The vote was the climax of a year of fierce debates between MPs as the civilian government attempted to reform the constitution and reduce the military's stranglehold on parliament.

The country is gearing up to polls likely to be held later this year, only the second since outright military rule came to an end.

But the military still wields considerable power, appointing three key ministers -- defence, border and home affairs.

Crucially, it holds a quarter of parliamentary seats, effectively giving it a veto over any legislation.

Suu Kyi's ruling National League for Democracy (NLD) has been fighting for reforms of the military-scripted 2008 constitution.

In unprecedented scenes in Myanmar's young parliament, the tempers of civilian and military MPs have frayed during discussions of the amendments, with MPs shouting at each other across a normally staid chamber.

But only 404 out of 633 MPs voted for the change, not enough to pass the 75 percent threshold needed.

NLD MP Aung Thein told AFP his party had anticipated the loss but had a duty to live up to its polls pledges to voters.

Amazon could collapse in 50 yrs

Warn scientists, blame global warming for causing irreversible damage to world's largest rainforest

AFP, Paris

The Amazon rainforest is nearing a threshold which, once crossed, would see one of the world's largest and richest ecosystems morph into arid savannah within half-a-century, scientists said Tuesday.

Another major ecosystem, Caribbean coral reefs, could die off in only 15 years were it to pass its own point-of-no-return, the scientists reported in the journal Nature Communications.

Each of these so-called "regime changes" would have dire consequences for humanity and other species with which we share habitat, they warned.

In both cases the projected tipping point for irreversible change results from global warming and environmental damage -- deforestation in the case of the Amazon, and pollution and acidification for corals.

The UN's climate science advisory

panel, the IPCC, has said that 1.5 degrees Celsius of atmospheric warming above preindustrial levels would doom 90 percent of the world's shallow-water corals. A 2C rise would spell their near-complete demise.



Earth's surface has already heated up more than 1C. The temperature tipping point for the Amazon is less clear, but scientists estimate that clearing 35 percent of its surface would trigger its eventual demise.

About 20 percent of the Amazon basin rainforest -- straddling seven

nations and covering more than five million square kilometres (two million square miles) -- has been wiped out since 1970, mostly for the production of lumber, soy, palm oil, biofuels and beef.

"Humanity needs to prepare for changes far sooner than expected," said lead author Simon Willcock, a professor at Bangor University's School of Natural Science.

Recent out-of-control fires in the Amazon and Australia -- both made more likely and more intense by climate change -- suggest that many ecosystems are "teetering on the edge of this precipice," he added.

Scientists not involved in the research endorsed its methodology and sounded an alarm at its conclusions.

"The implications of the study for the Amazon are terrifying," said Alexandre Antonelli, director of science at the Royal Botanical Gardens in Kew, London.

Biden takes control of Democratic race

Pressure grows on Sanders to end campaign after the ex-VP wins major primaries

AFP, Detroit

Joe Biden's trajectory to a November showdown with President Donald Trump looked unstoppable yesterday after he scooped a series of devastating primary wins -- as the party waited anxiously to see if his rival Bernie Sanders would concede and rally behind the presumptive nominee.

Pressure was mounting on Sanders to end his campaign as Biden inflicted defeats in Mississippi, Missouri, Idaho and Michigan, carving a clear path to becoming the Democratic standard bearer in a potentially bruising matchup with Trump.

Addressing supporters in Philadelphia as his victory took shape, 77-year-old centrist Biden reached out to Sanders, thanking the leftist Vermont senator and his supporters for their "tireless energy and their passion."

The former vice president struck a unifying tone as he affirmed on national television that he and Sanders "share a common goal and together we will defeat Donald Trump."

Another of the six states on offer, North Dakota, was called for Sanders early yesterday. He also led the count by around 2,100 votes in Washington state, the other major prize of Tuesday's primaries, with around 70 percent of the vote counted.

But Biden's win in Michigan, the Midwestern industrial state which could be a key battleground in November, was a major setback, prompting calls for Sanders to pull out.

The main question is whether Sanders, a self-declared democratic socialist, will fight to the bitter end, as he did four years ago against Clinton, or bow out early.

