

China, US spar over origin of coronavirus

AFP, Beijing

A Chinese government campaign to cast doubt on the origin of the coronavirus pandemic is fuelling a row with the US, with a Beijing official promoting conspiracy theories and Washington calling it the "Wuhan virus".

The spat comes as China tries to deflect blame for the contagion and reframe itself as a country that took decisive steps to buy the world time by placing huge swathes of its population under quarantine.

With cases falling in China and soaring abroad, Beijing is now rejecting the widely held assessment that the city of Wuhan is the birthplace of the outbreak.

Foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian went a step further on Thursday, saying on Twitter that "it might be US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan" -- without providing any evidence.

Dali Yang, a political science professor at the University of Chicago, said he believes Zhao was "tweeting in his official capacity".

Scientists, however, have long suspected that the virus jumped from an animal at the Wuhan market to a human before spreading globally.

The United States, meanwhile, has angered China by using language directly linking the virus to the country.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has called it the "Wuhan virus", prompting Beijing to reject the term as "despicable" and "disrespecting science".

US President Donald Trump started a televised address to his nation on Wednesday by speaking about the outbreak "that started in China".

The language is "part of his dog-whistling politics," said Australian National University researcher Yun Jiang. Robert O'Brien, the US national security adviser, on Wednesday insisted that the virus originated in Wuhan.

Beijing called his remarks "extremely immoral and also irresponsible".

Jiang said that "by sowing doubts into people's mind about where the virus originated, they're trying to deflect part of the blame for the outbreak".

Good news from Korea, China

Seoul reports more recovery than infections: Beijing reports 20 new cases

AFP, Seoul

South Korea -- once grappling with the largest coronavirus outbreak outside China -- saw its newly recovered patients exceed fresh infections for the first time yesterday, as it reported the lowest number of new cases for three weeks.

And in China, government yesterday morning reported just eight cases of the coronavirus, with no new domestic infections outside the epicentre of Hubei province. Later in the evening AFP put the number at 20 without giving any more information.

South Korea yesterday confirmed 110 new infections, the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) said, taking its total to date to 7,979. 67 people died so far.

But 177 fully recovered patients were released on Thursday, it added.

South Korea has an advanced medical system widely available to all, and has embarked on a huge coronavirus testing drive.

The number of new cases in Daegu, the southern city at the centre of the country's virus spread, had declined "dramatically" along with those in

neighbouring North Gyeongsang province, officials said.

So far, nearly 90 percent of South Korea's cases have been in the two regions.

But Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun, who is leading the response in Daegu, warned that the government "should not be complacent even a bit".



"The battle against the coronavirus has now become a global fight going far beyond Daegu," he said.

In China, the National Health Commission said there were five more people infected in Hubei's capital Wuhan, where the virus first emerged in December. The numbers are the lowest daily tally for Wuhan since China started reporting figures in January.

Three more imported cases from overseas were reported -- two in Shanghai and one in Beijing -- fuelling fears about China's strict containment measures being undone by people coming in from hotspots in other countries.

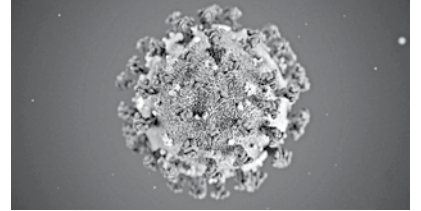
There have now been 88 imported cases.

Another seven people died, bringing the national toll from the disease in mainland China to 3,176. 80,813 people have been infected.

With new infections falling dramatically in recent days, authorities this week began to loosen some restrictions on Hubei's 56 million people, who have been under quarantine since late January.

The government in Qianjiang, a city of one million, said Thursday it would arrange special transport to take healthy workers to their jobs both inside and outside the province. The local government in Shishou, a small city of just over half a million, was also allowing workers to leave. Meanwhile, healthy people living in low-risk areas of the province can now travel within Hubei.

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC



Up to 150 m Americans could get infected: report

Between 70 to 150 million people in the United States could eventually be infected with the novel coronavirus, according to a projection shared with Congress, a lawmaker said Thursday.

Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib made the remarks during a hearing of the House of Representatives with members of the president's coronavirus task force, confirming earlier reports by US media outlets including Axios and NBC News.

"Congress's attending physician told the Senate that he expects between 70 to 150 million people to eventually contract the coronavirus in the United States," Tlaib said. The upper end of the projection is about 46 percent of the US population of 327 million people. By comparison German Chancellor Angela Merkel warned this week that up to 70 percent of her country's population could get the virus.

Sri Lanka shuts schools

Hundreds of parents besieged Sri Lankan schools Thursday following rumours that the coronavirus pandemic was spreading among children, prompting the government to close schools to ease tensions.

Education minister Dullas Alahapperuma said social media misinformation had caused panic among parents at several schools in the Colombo region. Although no students were infected, the government brought forward holidays due to start from April 6, giving students three extra weeks off, the minister said.

Sri Lanka has also this week suspended visas on arrival for nationals of 48 countries, including all EU member states. Visas for Chinese citizens were halted in January as the virus crisis erupted.



Mount Everest closed

Nepal yesterday suspended permits to climb Everest over the coronavirus pandemic, closing off the world's biggest mountain a day after China halted access from its side.

Nepal has halted climbing on all mountains in the country and stopped issuing tourist visas, Yogesh Bhattarai, Minister for Culture Tourism and Civil Aviation told AFP. The Himalayan country earns millions of dollars a year from Everest permits. Last year's spring window saw a record 885 people summit Everest, 644 of them from Nepal and 241 from the northern flank in Tibet. The traffic-clogged season saw 11 deaths on the mountain, with at least four blamed on overcrowding. Nepal has so far confirmed only one case of coronavirus.

Prayers restricted across Middle East

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

Religious authorities across the Middle East have moved to cancel or limit weekly prayer gatherings to help prevent the spread of the new coronavirus.

In Kuwait yesterday, religious authorities asked Muslims to pray at home as the Gulf states stepped up measures to fight the spread of the novel virus.

In Jerusalem, Christian, Muslim and Jewish leaders said services would continue to be held in the Holy Land but moved to limit indoor gatherings after the Israeli Health Ministry said they should not exceed 100 people.

The Islamic endowment that oversees the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound in occupied East Jerusalem, the third holiest site in Islam, said Friday prayers would be held as normal but encouraged people to pray in the outer courtyards and refrain from crowding inside the mosques.

It advised the elderly and sick not to enter crowded mosques.

Hard-hit Iran cancelled Friday prayers in major cities, and Egypt has ordered all mosques to limit Friday prayers, including the weekly sermon, to no more than 15 minutes. The prayers usually last around an hour.

Iraq, which has reported more than 80 confirmed cases of the coronavirus and eight deaths so far, scrapped Friday prayers in Karbala and in the country's predominantly Kurdish northern region. Last week, Iraq's most influential Shia cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, urged people to abide by a ban on mass prayers.

In Lebanon, Friday prayers have been temporarily suspended in all Shia mosques. The country's top Sunni authority has said it is forbidden for anyone with a contagious disease to attend prayers and has urged elderly people and those with weakened immune systems to pray at home.



Iranian firefighters disinfect streets in the capital Tehran in a bid to halt the wild spread of coronavirus, yesterday. Iranian forces will clear the streets nationwide within 24 hours and all citizens will be checked for the new coronavirus in a bid to halt its spread, the military said.

PHOTO: AFP



First Thai pro-democracy march since 2014 coup

Hundreds of pro-democracy protesters marched on parliament in Bangkok yesterday, wearing black T-shirts to mourn the state of Thailand under an army-aligned government, in the first street protest for several years.

Discontent with the administration of ex-army chief Prayut Chan-O-cha is seething, with a progressive opposition party disbanded and the country's economy faltering as the COVID-19 crisis batters the key tourism industry. Protesters have met inside university campuses in recent weeks but are now edging back onto the streets of the capital, which has played host to rival -- and often deadly -- rounds of street politics over the last 14 years.

Virus brightens possibility of unity govt in Israel

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called Thursday for the "immediate" formation of a national unity government to tackle the coronavirus pandemic, a proposal main challenger Benny Gantz said he was willing to discuss.

Netanyahu issued the call as he ordered the closure of schools. Final results of the March 2 elections showed the prime minister's right-wing Likud party and its allies falling short of the 61 seats required to form a government. Following Netanyahu's announcement, Gantz said "in light of the situation, we would be infatuated discussing the establishment of a broad, national emergency government." Gantz said such a government should include representatives from "all parties" represented in the parliament.

Barrier shows draft UK deal to EU members

Chief EU negotiator Michel Barnier yesterday said that he had sent an "ambitious" first draft of what could be a new post-Brexit trade deal with Britain to EU capitals. But even if the Brussels veteran's text finds favour with MEPs and the 27 capitals, there are provisions that are unlikely to be acceptable to Number 10.

The draft -- obtained by AFP -- would ensure Britain does not diverge far from EU state aid, environmental, labour and quality standards, while trade will be overseen by a "Specialised Committee on the Level Playing Field." But, in the case of any dispute over interpretation of EU law, the eventual deal's arbitration committee would have to defer "to the Court of Justice of the European Union to give a ruling on the question."

SOURCE: AFP

Turkey, Russia agree joint patrols in Syria after talks

Both sides sign prepared text, wish for truce to be lasting

AFP, Ankara

Turkish and Russian officials yesterday agreed to start joint patrols in Syria's Idlib at the weekend, Turkey's defence minister said, following a fragile ceasefire in the last rebel stronghold.

"Both sides have signed the prepared text, and it has entered into force. We will see the first application of this with joint patrols on March 15 along the M4 highway," said Hulusi Akar, quoted by state news agency Anadolu.

A Russian military delegation has been in Ankara since Tuesday to work out the details of a ceasefire agreed on March 5 in Moscow between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin.

The accord stated that a security corridor with joint Turkish-Russian patrols would be established along the key M4 highway of the northwestern province.

"Joint coordination centres will be set up with Russia where the activities will be managed together," the minister added.

Akar repeated Turkey's wish for the ceasefire to be "lasting".

Idlib had suffered heavy bombardment by Syrian forces and Russian warplanes since December, killing hundreds of civilians and forcing nearly a million to flee towards the Turkish border.

Despite being on opposing sides of the nine-year war, Turkey and Russia have worked closely on Syria, especially regarding developments in Idlib.

Turkey supports certain rebel groups in Idlib and has military observation posts under a previous ceasefire deal agreed with Russia in 2018.

Earlier yesterday, a Turkish security official said Turkey's observation posts in Idlib will remain in place and function despite being encircled. The official said that no heavy arms or equipment would be withdrawn from the posts.

The ceasefire deal, which has largely held since March 5, was struck after around 60 Turkish troops were killed in clashes in the region since last month.

IDLIB CEASEFIRE

India releases ex-CM of Kashmir Abdullah

AFP, Srinagar

Indian authorities yesterday released an influential Kashmiri lawmaker who had been held for seven months after New Delhi stripped the disputed region of its semi-autonomy and detained thousands of politicians and activists.

Farooq Abdullah, 82, had been confined to his residence in the main city of Srinagar since August 5 when the government split the Muslim majority state and put it under direct New Delhi rule.

An official order said the government was revoking Abdullah's detention "with immediate effect", without giving a reason.

Soon after, the parliamentarian and former state chief minister addressed supporters and thanked those "who fought for my freedom".

Abdullah, his son Omar Abdullah and several other top Kashmiri politicians were among thousands taken into custody following the clampdown in Kashmir, also claimed by Pakistan, where an armed rebellion against Indian rule has raged for decades.

The Abdullaha and other politicians were detained under the stringent Public Safety Act, that has been condemned by rights groups because suspects can be held for up to two years without appearing in court.

A police report justifying the detention accused the veteran lawmaker of resorting to "dirty politics" and "instigating and provoking general masses" against the Indian government.

COVID-19 could shake up global politics

AFP, Washington

Thousands of people have died, the US response has infuriated European allies, and China has gone on a propaganda offensive. The new coronavirus is shaping up to be a cataclysmic event with far-reaching consequences in global politics.

The COVID-19 pandemic strikes a world already in flux with the rise of nationalists such as US President Donald Trump who have scoffed at the rules of the "globalist" order.

"When the dust settles on the COVID-19 world, we won't be in the same place that we were just a week ago," said Jon Alterman, a senior vice president at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington.

"We know that governments will shake as citizens judge them to have fumbled in their response. We know that economies will be disrupted and some economies are likely to collapse," he said.

Trump, who initially dismissed the risks of COVID-19, late Wednesday abruptly imposed a 30-day ban on most travel from mainland Europe.

Leaders from the European Union voiced outrage at the move and said



that they had not been consulted -- which Trump acknowledged.

Kelly Magsamen, the vice president for national security and international policy at Center for American Progress, said Trump's move would only increase questions about Washington's historic leadership role.

COVID-19 first emerged late last year in Wuhan and Beijing initially tried to suppress the news including by detaining the doctor who sounded the alarm.

But China in the past week has sought to turn its COVID-19 response into a sort of soft power, with President Xi Jinping visiting Wuhan to trumpet success at containing the spread.

China has sent medical equipment to Italy and Spain, highlighting its authoritarian model as decisive. It has also used the crisis as leverage against the US, which has been seeking to combat Beijing's influence in all areas.

An article in the Global Times unsubtly hinted that China could stop exports of medical gears if the Trump

administration keeps pressing to restrict Huawei.

China as well as Russia has also promoted unfounded conspiracy theories to discredit the US.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo speaks of the illness as the "Wuhan virus" and Senator Tom Cotton has vowed that the US will "hold accountable those who inflicted it on the world."

Michael Green, who was an advisor to former president George W Bush, doubted that China would ultimately find many buyers for its "arguments about the failures of democracy." But he added: "That does not mean that the US will win this information battle."

Trump's 2016 upset win, Britain's vote to leave the EU and other populist victories had been seen as proof "that the technocrats failed" following the Great Recession of the late 2000s and the Iraq war, Green said.

"I think it's very possible that the macro result this time could be that the political populists failed and it's the technocrats who emerge as the heroes," Green said.

"We'll see. But that may be how political history turns in this chapter."

NEWS IN brief

Greece gets first woman president

Greece yesterday swore in the first woman president in its history as the country grapples with over 100 coronavirus cases. Katerina Sakellariopoulou, a 63-year-old senior judge, becomes the new Greek head of state for a five-year term. Although the president is nominally the head of the Greek state and commander-in-chief, the post is largely ceremonial. Greek presidents confirm governments and laws and technically can declare war -- but only in conjunction with the government.

Chelsea Manning freed from jail

A US judge on Thursday ordered former US military intelligence analyst Chelsea Manning released from jail, a day after a support group said she tried to kill herself. She had been imprisoned since May 16 last year for refusing to appear before a grand jury targeting anti-secrecy group WikiLeaks. However, the judge ordered Manning, 32, to pay \$256,000 in fines levied for her refusal to testify.

Canada approves N American trade deal

Canadian lawmakers hastily approved a North American free trade deal yesterday before announcing parliament would be suspended until late April over concerns about the new coronavirus. Lawmakers cut short debate to move to a vote on the Canada-United States-Mexico Agreement -- known as USMCA -- which was unanimously approved. A vote in the Senate was scheduled for later yesterday.