

CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK

S Korea winning the fight using big data and AI

MN ISLAM, Seoul

South Korea is fighting the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) by relying on its technological forte. The country has an advanced digital platform for big-data mining, along with artificial intelligence (AI) and Koreans are leading the technological front, with Samsung competing closely with Apple. Inc of USA.

Utilising big-data analysis, AI-powered advance warning systems, and intensive observation methodology, South Korea has already managed to bring the coronavirus situation in the country under control in a short time.

The government-run big-data platform stores information of all citizens and resident foreign nationals and integrates all government organisations, hospitals, financial services, mobile operators, and other services into it.

South Korea is using the analysis, information and references provided by this integrated data -- all different real-time responses and information produced by the platform are promptly conveyed to people with different AI-based applications.

Whenever someone is tested positive for COVID-19, all the people in the vicinity are provided with the infected person's travel details, activities, and commute maps for the previous two weeks through mobile notifications sent as a push system.

Government-run health services receive information on the person's contacts, making it easier to track those whom s/he had met during that time, and bring them under observation and medical tests. AI ensures prompt execution of all these tests. Hospitals, ambulance services, mobile test labs -- all rely on IT sector and technology to deliver prompt and efficient services.

South Korea also introduced drive-through coronavirus testing, in which a person drives his car inside a mobile testing lab, get his samples collected while sitting inside the vehicle, and gets test results within a few minutes.

If found to be infected, they are immediately isolated and taken to specialised treatment facilities. Many such drive-through labs are operational, being run with 5G facilities provided by mobile operators.

Those driving on the road are notified of the nearest drive-through lab where they may undergo medical tests.

If any infected person lived or worked at a large building, temporary medical centres are set up there to provide medical tests to all residents.

AI data analysis informs government about possible clusters of the virus, or areas with most risk, thus enabling prompt medical services and mobilising awareness initiatives in those areas.

The government has implemented AI-based regulation and process design to ensure supply and distribution of masks and other preventive items. Each person has to use their ID cards to buy two masks at a time from nearby medicine-stores. Even though several weeks have passed since the outbreak began in the country, there was not any noticeable hike in the price of daily essentials such as rice, oil, baby-food, etc.

"The ease of availability of data has enabled South Korea to define or decide or take initiative on the relevant aspects. Many countries do not have such elaborate digital data platform or sufficient technological prowess and logistics," said a Bangladeshi expatriate living in Korea.

In an address to the nation, South Korean premier Chung Sye-kyun has stressed the need to stay alert without becoming panicked, mentioning that everyone is under risk of being infected.

Mentioning that the number of coronavirus patients are coming down in South Korea and the government has managed to bring the situation under control, the premier also announced that the government offices will be run digitally with the officials and staff working from home, as an added precaution.

The author is founder and CEO of Ticon System Ltd, and has been involved in South Korea's IT sector.

Countries bolster virus defences

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Trump yesterday said he had taken a coronavirus test, as the White House began protectively checking the temperature of anyone coming into close contact with him or Vice President Mike Pence.

Appearing at a White House news conference where he attempted again to provide guidance and assurance to worried Americans, Trump said he had yet to receive the results of his own test.

Contrary to medical advice, the president was seen Friday shaking hands all round as he gathered his coronavirus response team at the White House -- a practice he yesterday said owed to long-time habit as a politician but which he said would have to change.

European nations meanwhile ramped up border controls, with foreigners forbidden from crossing into Russia from Norway and Poland. Denmark and the Czech Republic also announced stringent restrictions.

Squares and streets from Milan to Madrid were deserted as government calls to stay at home were heeded by most -- some Italians took to singing to each other from their windows to beat the social isolation, others organised rounds of applause.

Meanwhile, India yesterday declared the coronavirus outbreak in the country a "notified disaster".

In a brief two-page press release this evening the government said money from each state's Disaster Response Fund (SDRF) would be used for temporary accommodation and supply of food, water and medical care for patients and people in quarantine camps.

There are 83 confirmed COVID-19 cases in India, with at least two deaths linked to the virus. On Friday, Health Ministry officials said a further 4,000 potential cases had been identified through contract tracing and were being tracked.

India's West Bengal yesterday said all educational institutions will remain shut till March 31. However, board exams will continue as per schedule, they said.

The World Health Organization (WHO) confirmed Europe as the epicentre of the pandemic on Friday after a dramatic slump in new cases in China, where the virus first emerged in December last year.

China registered just a handful of new infections yesterday and most of the country's more than 80,000 confirmed patients have already recovered.

Attention instead has shifted to Spain, which has more than 5,753 cases (183 deaths) and Italy with more than 21,157 cases (1,441 deaths).

Iran too confirmed another huge jump yesterday to almost 13,000 cases, making it the world's third worst-affected country from a virus that has infected 151,760 people globally and killed 5,764.

Another hotspot France has reported 3,661 cases and 79 deaths.

The human cost is rapidly being matched by the economic cost -- financial markets endured a rollercoaster ride all week with spectacular losses triggered by fears of a global recession followed by huge gains after government spending pledges.

Companies announced drastic measures to help tackle the virus -- US tech giant Apple closed all of its stores outside China until March 27, with CEO Tim Cook saying he had learnt from steps taken in China.

British Airways meanwhile became the latest global firm to hint at drastic action to come, with CEO Alex Cruz telling staff to expect job losses.

Airlines have cancelled thousands of flights worldwide as COVID-19 decimates demand and countries, including the US ramp up travel restrictions, and several firms have hinted that bailouts could be required.

As economies reel and finance experts mull the impact, governments are also facing up to the public health dilemmas posed by the virus -- whether to try to stamp it out entirely with drastic restrictions or try to manage its spread.

British officials have argued for trying to flatten the curve, managing the outbreak to push the peak of the crisis to summer when hospitals will be able to cope better.

They argue this will help create "herd immunity", though experts are divided over whether there is evidence to support the theory.

"We don't know enough about the science of this virus, it hasn't been in our population for long enough," said the WHO's Margaret Harris.

Britain had resisted imposing any wide restrictions, but the media reported yesterday that a ban on large gatherings would come into force from next weekend. The legislation could see the cancellation of events such as the Wimbledon tennis tournament and the Glastonbury music festival, due to begin at the end of June.

Most other governments in affected regions have already begun to take drastic action.

Yesterday, the Philippines introduced a night-time curfew in Manila, Saudi Arabia became the latest country to ban international flights and New Zealand said international travellers would have to self-isolate on arrival.

Africa has so far been spared the worst of the illness but Rwanda declared its first case yesterday in a sign of the widening global spread.

Also widening was the impact on the sporting calendar, with football seasons curtailed, Formula One races postponed and cricket tours called off.

Japan was forced to deny claims that the Tokyo Olympics could be called off as well, after Trump said "maybe they postpone it for a year".



Shoppers queue for checking out after almost emptying shelves at a supermarket in London yesterday, as consumers worry about product shortages, leading to the stockpiling of household products due to the outbreak of the novel coronavirus.

PHOTO: AFP

Corona quacks run amok

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the least -- if only garlic could cure coronavirus, one wonders why countries are having to reorient their entire health systems to try and contain the virus.

This has become such a wide-spread message that WHO has since then had to officially debunk this too -- meaning this "cure" will not be doing anything other than subjecting one to a foul-tasting drink.

But "cures" continue to crop up. A photo circulated widely shows a banner by a homeopathy hall in Purana Palan claiming to have found a prevention for coronavirus. "Nothing to fear anymore! Preventive medication of coronavirus made according to homeopathic medicine science can be found at Sekandar Homeo Hall!" reads the sign.

So The Daily Star called the number provided. One Dr Abdullah picked up and informed, "Yes, we have preventive medicine for coronavirus. You can buy it for Tk 50 each." The establishment also reportedly treats those afraid of getting married, tumours of any and every type, and hypersexual disorder.

He is not the only one. Indian politicians have openly been claiming that cow urine and dung are useful to fight against coronavirus. Alcohol-free hand sanitisers made of cow urine are now available on Amazon India.

It is to be noted that the only hand sanitisers suggested for use are those with over 60 percent alcohol.

There's more. On January 29 this year, India's Ministry of AYUSH (Ayurveda, Yoga & Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha, Sowa Rigpa and Homoeopathy) issued a directive to the general public stating, "The Group of Experts inter-alia has

recommended that homeopathy medicine Arsenicum album 30 could be taken as prophylactic medicine against coronavirus infections." Arsenicum album is a highly diluted solution of arsenic trioxide.

Meanwhile, several religious leaders have been quick to jump on the bandwagon, and have been delivering sermons regarding the prevention and cure of coronavirus across the country.

In a YouTube video with 4.8 million views, titled "New information leaked about coronavirus that China could not keep secret", a religious leader addressing a congregation in Trishal, Mymensingh described an interview taken of the virus in the land of dreams.

"Mamun Maruf from Italy told me about this dream of his. Let me tell you, as the qiyamat draws closer the dreams of Muslims will not lie," the preacher started the story with this disclaimer.

"He had fallen asleep around half past midnight, when this coronavirus which looks like a kodom phool came in front of him. 'When did you come to this planet?' the man asked the virus. 'We came on October 23, 2019 when three Chinese soldiers raped and killed a Chinese Muslim woman named Ayesha'," he described.

"Then there was a command that the corona army go attack China," he concluded.

Up until this point, the sermon might have come across as ridiculous -- but then his tirade took a sinister, communal turn.

He went on to predict that coronavirus relayed the message that it will kill one-seventh of the world's population. "We will mostly kill the

Buddhists, the people killing the Muslims."

"Those who say their prayers, do their ablutions, emit a glow which humans can't see but viruses can. They will not be attacked by the virus."

The crowd responded with loud praise for the Creator -- a reminder that racism against certain communities have drastically risen along with the spread of coronavirus.

In a follow-up video taken during another such session, he spoke at length about a follow-up interview taken with coronavirus in dreamland, where the virus apparently relayed the message that if people shun Indian television and cinema channels, they will not get coronavirus. The listeners made loud noises of acquiescence.

The story does not stop there -- in yet another follow-up video taken during a session in Daudkandi, Cumilla, the preacher said an antidote to coronavirus has been discovered and it involves the meat of pigeons and spiders and must be concocted by a pious man.

"The formula for this is 1.q7 + 6 = 13. Seven drops taken over seven days will cure those affected," he said, confident in his conviction. The crowd once again cheered in amazement.

It has been reported by media that the new coronavirus came from Wuhan's wildlife market. Among many other sellers, the market catered to Chinese traditional medicine practitioners. Faith in pseudoscience and superstitions may have led to the advent of coronavirus -- will it dominate the field of prevention and cure too?

with me. They have not eaten in 24 hours."

At one stage of the demonstrations, some 40 to 45 people started pushing the gate of the hajj camp and police had to jostle with them.

New infections in Italy soared Friday by more than 2,500 and virus-related deaths made their biggest single-day jump there, increasing by 250.

In the three weeks since the country identified its first virus cluster, Italy has reached a total of 17,600 confirmed cases -- the largest outbreak after China -- with 1,266 deaths.

The Italian government has ordered an unprecedented lockdown, ordering businesses to close and restricting people's movement.

On Friday, the World Health Organization warned that Europe has now become the epicentre for the pandemic, reporting more daily cases than China did at the height of its outbreak.

2 more cases confirmed

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positive today [yesterday] and are now at a hospital."

She said more information would be disclosed today.

Earlier in the day, at another press conference, the IEDCR director said the third person, out of the three reported coronavirus cases in Bangladesh, was found to be free of the virus in the latest tests.

"We'll conduct another test after 24 hours to confirm if the person has fully recovered," she said.

Meanwhile, nine people were kept isolated and four others institutionally quarantined at different hospitals after they showed symptoms of novel coronavirus, said the IEDCR.

On March 8, the IEDCR had announced that three people, including two Italy-returnees, were detected with the virus.

Two days later, IEDCR tested them again and found two of them to be free of the COVID-19 infection.

After a follow-up test, the institute confirmed it.

One of the two recovered people was also allowed to go home.

The IEDCR tested the third person again on Friday.

"We want to give you good news -- the third person was found negative to corona infection in yesterday's [Friday] test," said Flora.

The IEDCR director said they would carry out another test. "If the test result comes negative, we'll let him go."

The IEDCR tested 24 more people in the last 24 hours till 12:30pm yesterday and has so far tested 221 people for the virus, which was declared a global pandemic by the WHO.

BRIEFING

At the briefing, Abdul Momen said the government suspended on-arrival visas for all countries from two weeks from today to keep Bangladesh safe.

He said passengers would not

be allowed to enter Bangladesh from any European country, except England, until March 31.

"We must protect our people," Momen said adding that four of those found infected with coronavirus came from abroad while the other contracted the virus from her husband.

He said they would observe the overall situation in the next two weeks.

The foreign minister also said all decisions are taken in the interest of the people of Bangladesh.

He reminded journalists that the government even cut short the March 17 mega event on the birth centenary of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Meanwhile, airport sources said around 150 Bangladeshi expatriates are scheduled to arrive at the Dhaka airport today from Italy, which is the worst coronavirus affected country after China.

Newborn contracts coronavirus in UK

STAR REPORT

A newborn has tested positive for coronavirus in the UK, making the baby possibly one of the youngest cases in the country, UK's local media reported.

The child's mother, who was taken to a north London hospital days before the birth with suspected pneumonia, has also caught the virus, according to The Guardian.

The NHS Trust confirmed that two patients tested positive for coronavirus and also requested staff who were in close contact with them during the treatment to self-isolate.

It is not yet known whether the child contracted the disease in the womb or was infected during birth. The Sun, which first revealed the case, reported that the baby was still being treated at the hospital but the mother has been transferred to a specialist infections hospital, reports The Guardian.

Saarc leaders

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example to the world, and contribute to a healthier planet," he tweeted.

The move was welcomed by every member nations including Pakistan.

Saarc has failed to hold any summit after 2014 due to tussle between India and Pakistan. The last summit, which was scheduled to take place in Pakistan's Islamabad in 2016, was cancelled due to India's withdrawal from it. The move came after the 2016 Pathankot attack in Indian Kashmir. India accused Pakistan of orchestrating it.

Bangladesh State Minister for Foreign Affairs, Shahriar Alam, said that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina welcomes the proposal and looks forward to a constructive dialogue with the Saarc leaders and others who already consented to discuss way forward at this testing time for the region and the world.

Maldives President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih thanked Modi for taking the initiative and pledged full support.

Nepal's Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli said his government is ready to work closely with Saarc member states to protect the people of the region from the deadly disease.

Thanking the Indian PM for his leadership, Bhutanese PM Lotay Tshering said the region must come together to face the crisis.

"Smaller economies are hit harder, so we must coordinate. With your (Narendra Modi) leadership, I have no doubt we will see immediate and impactful outcome. Looking forward to the video conference," he added.

Pakistan also responded positively to Modi's proposal, saying it was ready to participate in the conference, acknowledging that coordinated efforts were needed to minimise the threat posed by the deadly virus.

"We have communicated that SAPM (special assistant to Pakistani prime minister) on health (Zafar Mirza) will be available to participate in the video conference of Saarcmember countries on the issue," Pakistan Foreign Office Spokesperson Aisha Farooqui said in a tweet on Friday.

Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa said he is ready to join the discussion and share Sri Lankan's learnings and best practices and to learn from other Saarc members.

"Let's unite in solidarity during these trying times and keep our citizens safe."As of now, India has recorded 83 cases, the maximum number of coronavirus cases in the eight members Saarc nations. It is followed by Pakistan (20), Maldives (8), Afghanistan (7), Bangladesh (5), Sri Lanka (2), and Nepal and Bhutan one each.