

COVID-19 CONSPIRACY THEORY

US summons Chinese envoy

REUTERS, Washington

The United States on Friday summoned China's ambassador after a senior official in Beijing tweeted the "ridiculous" suggestion that the US military started the COVID-19 pandemic, the State Department said.

David Stilwell, the top US diplomat for Asia, issued a "stern representation" to Ambassador Cui Tiankai a day after foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian tweeted the conspiracy theory.

"China is seeking to deflect criticism for its role in starting a global pandemic and not telling the world," a State Department official said.

"Spreading conspiracy theories is dangerous and ridiculous. We wanted to put the government on notice we won't tolerate it, for the good of the Chinese people and the world," the official said.

Zhao, in tweets in both Mandarin and English that gained wide traction on Chinese social media, a day earlier suggested that "patient zero" in the global pandemic may have come from the United States -- not the Chinese metropolis of Wuhan, where cases were first reported in late 2019.

"It might be US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan. Be transparent! Make public your data! US owe us an explanation," tweeted Zhao, who is known for his provocative statements on social media.

His comment came as President Donald Trump's administration, which has faced increasing criticism over its own coronavirus response, has increasingly highlighted the illness's foreign origins, with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo dubbing it the "Wuhan virus."

Scientists widely believe that the pandemic started in a market in Wuhan that sold exotic animals for human consumption.



A student demonstrates how to wash hands during an awareness campaign about coronavirus disease (COVID-19), at a school in Chennai, India, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Philippine capital set to impose night-time curfew

Manila will impose a night-time curfew in the city of 12 million, officials said yesterday, as the Philippines steps up efforts to curb the spread of the new coronavirus. The measure takes effect today along with President Rodrigo Duterte's order to seal off the capital from the rest of the country which has recorded 98 virus cases, including eight deaths. People will have to stay home between 8:00 pm and 5:00 am except to travel to work, buy essentials or seek medical assistance. Mayors of Manila's 17 local government areas are also pushing for shopping malls -- the centres of life in the country -- to be temporarily shuttered. Schools will also be closed for a month and mass gatherings banned.

UK to ban mass gatherings from next week

The British government will ban mass gatherings from next week in an attempt to curb the coronavirus outbreak, an escalation of its crisis plan that critics had said was too relaxed. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has so far resisted pressure to take some of the stringent measures adopted by other European countries to slow the spread of the virus. Legislation would be published next week to give the government powers to deal with the outbreak, including to stop mass gatherings and compensate organisations, the source said. Johnson postponed for a year local and mayoral elections in England that had been due to take place in May. As of Friday, Britain had 798 cases of the illness, and 11 people had died.



UN non-essential staff to work from home

All United Nations staff at its headquarters in New York were told Friday to work from home for at least three weeks due to the coronavirus outbreak unless it was essential for them to be present. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said the plan was "to reduce our physical presence at United Nations Headquarters, while continuing to deliver on our mandates." "Your health and well-being remain my greatest concern. Be safe, be smart, be kind," he said in a separate message to staff Thursday. About 3,000 UN employees are based in New York. A Philippine diplomat this week tested positive for the new coronavirus in the first recorded case at UN headquarters. Many organizations and companies around the world have sent staff home to try to reduce the spread of the virus.

SOURCE: AFP

Super-spreaders: Myth or reality? UK says virus needs to infect 60pc of Britons to 'save lives'

AFP, Paris

Can a single COVID-19 patient infect dozens of others? Although transmission rates in the current outbreak appear to be far lower, a variety of factors can lead to an individual infecting many.

The concept of so-called "super-spreaders" -- patients who typically infect far more people than the standard transmission rates -- emerged in previous outbreaks of diseases such as Sars and Mers.

Amesh Adalja, an expert in emerging infectious diseases at John Hopkins University, said the term was not scientific and there was no set quantity of transmissions that would define a super-spreader.

"But, in general, it is usually a markedly higher figure when compared to that of other individuals," he told AFP.

A range of variables govern how many people an individual infects, from how fast they shed the virus to how many people they come in to close contact with.

The novel coronavirus has a typical transmission rate of 2-3 -- that is, every confirmed case appears to infect between 2 and 3 other people on average.

But the pandemic has thrown up at least two patients who appear to have been super-spreaders.

One suspected super-spreader, a British national, appears to have infected a dozen others when he returned from Singapore and then went skiing in the Alps.

He recovered, but may have infected another five people after returning home.

In South Korea, which has the second highest number of COVID-19 cases outside of Italy, a woman known as Patient 31 appears to have infected dozens of others.

But in an ever better-connected world, it can be challenging to definitively link transmissions to an individual patient.

"It's possible that what we call super-spreaders exist, those patients who don't only infect 2-3 others but could infect dozens," said Eric Caumes, head of infectious and tropical diseases at Paris' Pitie-Salpetriere Hospital.

"The problem is we aren't spotting them."

According to Olivier Bouchaud, head of infectious diseases at that Avicenne hospital in Paris' suburbs, variable transmission rates could be down to how fast a patient sheds the virus once infected.

"That's just a hypothesis at this point," he said. "Obviously we don't have a clear explanation, and there's nothing specific to COVID-19."

THE STRAITS TIMES/ANN

The UK government is battling criticism of a coronavirus plan that blends blunt talk of the pandemic's toll with modest steps that fall far short of measures taken in other countries.

Patrick Vallance, the chief scientific adviser, said in broadcast interviews on Friday that the infection rate could hit 60 per cent of the British population, after Prime Minister Boris Johnson warned that "many more" families will lose loved ones.

The approach is aimed at making sure the right interventions are made at the right time to deal with an outbreak that's going to last months, officials said.

The UK risks becoming an outlier in the global fight against the fast-spreading coronavirus, as nations across Europe take more aggressive steps such as closing schools to respond to a widening crisis.

The government faces a growing backlash after saying on Thursday that it was shifting strategy away from efforts to contain the spread of the disease towards

moves aimed at delaying the worst of the epidemic.

Mr Vallance defended the UK's approach, saying officials are trying to reduce and broaden the peak of the outbreak, "not to suppress it completely." A 60 per cent infection rate would help build up a degree of "herd immunity", he said.

Asked why the UK was still going ahead with large events, such as Saturday's Six Nations Championship rugby match, Mr Vallance said it's about impact, not headlines.

"It's eye-catching to say stop those - it's not actually a big effect on the transmission," Vallance said in an interview on Radio 4. "I think it's more likely that there will be transmission in pubs and other areas where people are aggregating watching it than in the actual stadium itself."

The UK is not ruling out closing schools, but has decided against it for now, he said. If the government were to take that step, facilities would have to be closed for a prolonged period of "many months", he said.

Italians take to singing at windows to beat virus blues

REUTERS, Milan

Italians blocked in their homes by the coronavirus outbreak joined together to sing patriotic songs from their balconies, a defiant response to a crisis that has pushed the country's health system to the limit and turned daily life on its head.

From Milan, near the northern epicentre of the crisis, to the capital Rome and Naples and Palermo in the south, social media showed people on their balconies or leaning from windows and singing the national anthem or popular songs over the past couple of days.

Yesterday at noon, many people across the country went onto their balconies to offer a round of applause to the doctors and nurses working on the frontlines of the crisis.

With the coronavirus pandemic spreading rapidly across the world, Italy is the worst affected country in Europe, with at least 17,660 cases and 1,266 deaths by Friday.

Italy's hardest hit area remains the prosperous northern region of Lombardy around the financial capital Milan, but the virus has spread across the country.

The government has imposed an unprecedented lockdown, closing schools and most shops, barring all but essential movement and telling people to remain in their homes.

On social media, celebrities have urged people to stay at home and to wash their hands regularly. Ordinary Italians have posted a flood of images showing life under lockdown, as well as jokes about the crisis and the difficulty of maintaining domestic harmony.

The government and leading public figures have also sought to reassure the public. Hashtags with encouraging messages like #allwillbewell have proliferated as authorities and individuals have tried to maintain a sense of optimism amid the shutdown.



A woman applauds as she hugs a dog, during a flash mob to raise morale during the coronavirus crisis, as the Italian government continues restrictive movement measures to combat the outbreak, in Milan, Italy, yesterday. Inset, A man sings from his balcony.

PHOTO: AFP

INDIA AND CORONAVIRUS

Lucky escape or emergency ahead?

AFP, New Delhi

Despite being poorer and more densely populated than China and having a shakier healthcare system, India has officially recorded only 81 cases of the coronavirus and just one death.

This has raised hopes that the virus that has infected more than 130,000 people and killed 5,000 worldwide might largely pass the world's second-most-populous nation by.

But with only about 5,000 Indians tested, some experts doubt the official figures and warn that if there is a major outbreak, the country of 1.3 billion is woefully unprepared.

"It's hard to imagine there are only so few cases in India," Ashish Jha, director of the Harvard Global Health Institute, told AFP.

"India's a big country where a lot of people live in very close, compact spaces. It is unclear to me why India would somehow magically skip this pandemic."

India on Friday imposed some of the

world's toughest border measures in the current crisis, barring most foreigners and suspending visa-free access for millions from the vast diaspora.

Those arriving, including Indians, who have travelled to virus hotspots such as China and Italy must be quarantined for 14 days. At land borders there is "robust screening".

More than a million air passengers have been screened and authorities have stepped up efforts to identify those with the virus and people in contact with them.

All mobile calls begin with a recorded health message, preceded by coughing, while social media, newspapers and television carry advice.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi tweeted that India could "break the chain" in the spread of the virus, but in many ways the country is a paradise for infectious diseases.

Some 70 million people live in extreme poverty, many in teeming unhygienic slums where working from home or "social

distancing" is not an option.

Around 420 people are crammed into every square kilometre of India compared to 148 people in China. Millions also move about internally to find work.

Health spending is among the world's lowest at 3.7 percent of GDP, according to Bloomberg News. Some 70 percent of Indians live in rural areas where healthcare is patchy.

But India's healthcare system has shown itself capable before.

During an outbreak of the much deadlier Nipah virus in Kerala in 2018, deaths were kept to 17 and human-to-human transmission successfully contained.

"I am quite hopeful that in another 10-15 days things will settle down," said Rajan Sharma, national president of the medical association.

The coming hot season may help, Aggarwal added.

"SARS and MERS all reduced when summer came. Maybe the heat and humidity will kill the virus," he said.

Sanitizing cell phones a must

CNN ONLINE

Whatever you touch with your hands -- food, bacteria, dust -- can be transferred to your cell phone, making it a mobile petri dish possibly teeming with germs. So there's a growing discussion about how to keep phones sanitized as the novel coronavirus outbreak continues to spread worldwide.

And that's why sales of a device-cleaning machine called PhoneSoap are soaring.

PhoneSoap's products, which kill germs on phones by bathing them in UV light, haven't been tested against COVID-19. But revenue so far this month is about 20 times higher than in the same period last year, co-founder Dan Barnes told CNN Business on March 10. PhoneSoap kills 99.99% of household germs, including E. coli and salmonella, according to the firm's website.

The company sold out of its devices in early March, but it's currently taking pre-orders that will ship between April 15 and May 30, according to its website.

Phone hygiene matters generally because research has shown our mobile devices carry pathogens that might include antibiotic-resistant bacteria, said Mia Lieberman, a clinical veterinarian at Harvard Medical School who has tested the PhoneSoap's effectiveness.

These germs can pose a risk, especially for people with preexisting health conditions, she added.



NZ cancels mosque massacre remembrance

New Zealand has cancelled a national remembrance service to mark Sunday's first anniversary of the Christchurch mosque attacks because of coronavirus fears, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said. The service to mark the March 15 mass shooting, when a self-avowed white supremacist opened fire at two mosques during Friday prayers, killing 51, had been expected to attract several thousand people, with many travelling from overseas. Ardern said New Zealand needed to take a precautionary approach. Six people have so far tested positive for the new coronavirus in New Zealand.

US to enhance defence position in Middle East

A top American General on Friday said that the US was enhancing its defence position in the Middle East after the latest tit-for-tat attacks in Iraq. During a press briefing at a Pentagon, Commander of the US Central Command Kenneth McKenzie said that the American military will continue to operate two aircraft carrier strikes groups in the region, according to report. This is the first period of extended dual US carrier operations in the Middle East since 2012, according to McKenzie. The General also noted that the US military is moving Patriot missile defence systems into Iraq, and weapons systems for countering rockets, artillery, and mortars, known as C-RAM, will also be deployed.

Dozens detained at Russian opposition protest

Moscow police detained dozens of people at a protest against "political repressions" near the headquarters of the Russian security service, including a well-known human rights activist. The protest demanding to free political prisoners was called by supporters of men convicted this year on terrorism charges, many of whom said in court they had been tortured by the FSB security service. The OVD Info website, which tracks detentions at political protests, listed 49 people as detained by police, adding that some were hurt in the altercations. Some at the protest spoke out against the planned constitutional reforms currently in process of being adopted, which will give President Vladimir Putin a chance to run for two more terms.

SOURCE: AFP