

CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK

Italy's death toll overtakes China's

Troops deployed to move coffins from overwhelmed town

REUTERS, Milan

Italy's death toll from coronavirus overtook that of China, where the virus first emerged, on Thursday as hospitals said they were being overwhelmed and the government prepared to prolong emergency lockdown measures.

A total 427 deaths were registered in Italy over the past 24 hours, bringing the total nationwide tally to 3,405 since the outbreak surfaced on Feb. 21. China has recorded 3,245 deaths since early January.

However, Italy has far fewer confirmed cases - 41,035 as of Thursday against 80,907 in China.

Officials and experts believe the total number of infections here is significantly higher, with testing largely limited to those arriving for hospital care. The country's large, elderly population, who are particularly vulnerable to the virus, is also seen as a factor for the high number of fatalities.

"We're working in a state of very high stress and tension," said Daniela Confalonieri, a nurse at a hospital in Milan, the capital of the wealthy northern region of Lombardy, which has been the epicentre of the epidemic.

"Unfortunately we can't contain the situation in Lombardy. There's a high level of contagion and we're not even counting the dead any more," she said.

Underscoring the scale of the drama, soldiers transported bodies overnight from the northern town of Bergamo, northeast of Milan, whose cemetery has been overwhelmed.

An army spokesman said 15 trucks and 50 soldiers had been deployed to move coffins to neighbouring provinces. Earlier, local authorities had appealed for help with cremations as their own crematorium could not cope with the huge workload.

"Look at the news that's coming out of Italy and take note of what the situation really is like. It's unimaginable," said the Milan nurse, Confalonieri.

POLICE CHECKS

Italy went into virtual lockdown before other countries in Europe but, with cases still rising, the government is considering even tougher measures

that would further restrict the limited amount of outdoor movement currently permitted.

Luca Zaia, governor of the Veneto region neighbouring Lombardy, demanded stronger curbs from Rome, including closing all shops on Sunday, and said if they were not passed, he would consider passing a regional decree.

"I hope there will soon be measures to restrict people jogging or going out for walks. I'm sorry about that, but the alternative is intensive care, hospitalisation and contagion," he said.

At the other end of the country, in Sicily, the regional governor said the army would now help police make spot checks to ensure only people with legitimate reasons were out.

Police across Italy have stopped more than 1.2 million people over the past week and booked some 51,000 for violating the rules, the interior ministry said on Thursday.

Corriere della Sera newspaper quoted Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte as saying the government would extend the deadline on emergency rules closing schools and many businesses.

The measures currently order most shops to stay shut until at least March 25 and schools till April 3. He did not say how long schools would have to remain closed.

Education Minister Lucia Azzolina told SkyTG24 television that schools would reopen only when there was "certainty of absolute safety", adding that the end of the school year would depend on how well online lessons went in coming weeks.

The contagion is also badly damaging Italy's economy, which had already been on the brink of recession before the virus struck last month and the government imposed a nationwide clampdown, causing many businesses to grind to a halt.

The Treasury has announced a 25 billion euro (\$26.84 billion) package of measures to support companies and workers and sources said it was considering extending guarantees on bank loans to help firms hit by a collapse in orders.

China offers ray of hope

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border controls and unleashed nearly a trillion dollars to prop up the teetering world economy, only to see the once-in-a-century pandemic seemingly spiral further out of control.

Across the planet, the death toll from the virus whose main symptoms are a dry cough and fever has risen to over 9,000 with more than 217,000 infections reported, according to an AFP tally based on official sources.

There were no new cases in Wuhan -- the central Chinese city where the virus first emerged in December -- for the first time since authorities started publishing figures in January, according to the National Health Commission.

Wuhan and its 11 million people were placed under strict quarantine on January 23, with more than 40 million other people in the rest of Hubei province entering lockdown in the following days.

The rest of China also enacted tough measures to limit public gatherings.

There were eight more deaths in China -- all in Hubei -- raising the nationwide total to 3,245, according to the commission.

There have been nearly 81,000 infections in China but only 7,263 people remain sick with the COVID-19 disease.

But there were fears that Asia faces a second wave of cases imported from abroad, with 34 new cases reported in China yesterday, the highest figure for two weeks.

The pandemic is worsening elsewhere, with Italy appearing set to overtake China as the country where the most people are confirmed as having died from the COVID-19 disease.

Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte said Italy's national lockdown, which has been copied around Europe, would be prolonged to April 3, shattering hopes of a quick end to the crisis.

"We will not be able to return immediately to life as it was before," he said.

France also mooted extending the two-week lockdown ordered this week by President Emmanuel Macron, as the interior minister blasted "idiots" who flout home confinement rules and put others at risk.

Spain, where coronavirus deaths jumped by nearly 30 percent over the past 24 hours, is one of several countries that have begun requisitioning hotels for use as hospitals.

Hard-hit Iran also announced new fatalities and said it was granting early release to 10,000 prisoners to reduce numbers in jails.

The disease continued to hit high-profile figures with EU Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier and Monaco's Prince Albert II among those testing positive.

With countries paralysed by the pandemic and stock markets imploding, policymakers this week unleashed a wave of measures to shore up the global economy.

The European Central Bank late Wednesday announced a 750-billion-euro bond-buying scheme dubbed the "big bazooka".

"Extraordinary times require extraordinary action. There are no limits

to our commitment to the euro," ECB chief Christine Lagarde said.

US President Donald Trump signed a \$100 billion emergency aid package to provide free coronavirus testing for those who need it, sick pay and paid family leave.

Trump said he viewed himself as a "wartime president", even as his administration faced growing criticism over a lack of testing for coronavirus and for the speed of its response.

The US has so far shied away from the sweeping restrictions used in China and many European countries, although the streets of many of its major cities have emptied as local curbs come into effect.

European and US stocks staged a rebound on the stimulus news, although Asian markets took another beating.

But the sense of impending doom continues to cast a pall over the world economy with airlines, carmakers and others all warning of bleak times ahead.

The battle is only just beginning across the rest of the world, with the shadow of the virus lengthening across Africa.

The Nigerian mega-city of Lagos announced it would shut its schools while Burkina Faso confirmed the first death in sub-Saharan Africa.

Russia reported its first death and even the Pacific nation of Fiji said it had its first case.

The UN warned meanwhile that as nations bring in shutdowns and travel bans, some three billion people lack even the most basic weapons to protect themselves from the virus: soap and running water.

World Health Organization head Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus urged countries to "come together as one against a common enemy: an enemy against humanity".

Countries are taking increasingly drastic steps to stem infections, with Australia and New Zealand banning non-residents from arriving, and India imposing a one-day nationwide curfew.

Britain, where Prime Minister Boris Johnson had initially chosen a different path, closed dozens of London Underground stations and shut down schools, although his government denied reports it was about to lock down the capital.

While the EU has closed its borders to outsiders, in many countries bars, restaurants and most shops have closed their doors until further notice, bringing life in Europe's normally bustling cities to a halt.

The virus also continues to hit sports and cultural events, with Greece handing over the Olympic flame to Tokyo 2020 organisers at a ceremony held behind closed doors amid calls for the games to be postponed.

English football also extended its shutdown until at least April 30.

Countries are also working to combat hoarding. As others stockpiled toilet paper and pasta, the French are thronging bakeries for their famed baguettes.

"We've seen people come in who want to buy 50 baguettes at a time," said Matthieu Labbe of France's Federation of Bakeries. "There's something like a psychosis in some people,"



Personal trainer Antonietta Orsini carries out an exercise class for her neighbours from her balcony during a lockdown imposed by government to prevent the spread of coronavirus, in Rome, Italy. Photo was taken on Wednesday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Govt mulls lockdown of vulnerable areas

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The meeting also decided that all government offices would remain open.

Meanwhile, the government yesterday instructed the authorities concerned to halt all political, cultural and religious gatherings until further notice.

In a video conference in the evening, top government officials, including Cabinet Secretary Khandaker Anwarul Islam and Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister Ahmad Kaikaus, strictly ordered the field-level officials to ensure that such gatherings, including "waz mahfils", remain suspended for now.

In another development, restrictions were imposed on public transport movement at some places in Madaripur's Shibchar upazila yesterday. Those places in the upazila are being considered "vulnerable" to the coronavirus outbreak, said government officials.

Most shops, including those of cosmetics, furniture and electronic appliances, in those places were also closed. The shops selling daily essentials, however, were open.

The moves came as four more persons were diagnosed with Covid-19 yesterday, taking the total number of confirmed coronavirus cases in the country to 18.

WHO has lately declared the outbreak a global pandemic. CORONA ISSUE DOMINATES MEETING

Health Minister Zahid Maleque told the meeting yesterday that Shibchar upazila should be placed on lockdown as the number of returnees from abroad was higher there, said meeting sources.

He also said many of the confirmed coronavirus cases in the country were reported from the area.

After the meeting, Planning Minister MA Mannan said the people of the country were not familiar that with lockdowns, so they would rather tighten measures to prevent the spread of Covid-19 in "vulnerable" areas.

Mannan also said the corona issue was discussed at the NEC meeting for more than one hour and the prime minister expressed her thoughts on it. "The main point is we have to work and take preventive measures simultaneously."

At the meeting, the home and health ministers apprised others of measures taken to combat the outbreak, he said, adding that the PM then directed the

authorities concerned to engage the mass media and celebrities in raising awareness on the issue.

She also asked officials concerned to ensure the safety of all doctors and nurses, the minister added.

Before the meeting, body temperature of all the ministers and other participants was checked using a handheld infrared thermometer. A state minister left the meeting after it was found that his temperature was high, said meeting sources.

DISCUSSION ON LOCKDOWN

Speaking at a press briefing later in the day, the health minister said a good number of people with coronavirus symptoms were detected in Faridpur and Madaripur, particularly in Shibchar upazila.

- >> Leave of all health officials concerned cancelled
- >> Public transport movement restricted in Madaripur's Shibchar
- >> Govt offices to remain open

"We will go for a lockdown there if the situation worsens," he said at the briefing at his secretariat office. "The number of expatriates and those in quarantine is higher there in comparison to other districts."

Talking to The Daily Star, Wahidul Islam, deputy commissioner of Madaripur, confirmed that restrictions were imposed on public transport in some areas of Shibchar upazila.

Shibchar Upazila Nirbahi Officer Md Asaduzzaman said, "No decision on placing the entire upazila on lockdown has been taken yet. If the government decides to enforce the lockdown, we will ensure the enforcement."

He said a good number of expatriates live in the upazila and vehicular movement was banned from Shibchar bypass area to Madaripur. Drivers of public transports have been asked to use the highway, instead of using the bypass, he said.

The UNO said they requested all to prevent all types of gatherings in the upazila and asked the owners of shops selling cosmetics, furniture, and electronics items to keep those closed.

OTHER MOVES

Meanwhile, the government cancelled leave of all officers and employees concerned of the health sector to tackle

the coronavirus situation, reports BSS.

Besides, Tongi Jtama ground will be readied to beef up the quarantine facilities.

"All physicians, nurses, officers and employees concerned will not get their leaves until issuance of further directives," the health minister said at the press conference yesterday.

When his attention was drawn to the issue that many returnees from abroad were not following quarantine rules, Maleque said measures were being taken to prepare the Jtama ground to strengthen quarantine facilities under the supervision of Bangladesh Army.

He said the COVID-19 is highly contagious, so no public gathering would be allowed in the country now. "Wedding ceremonies would have to be stopped. Schools and colleges have already been shut."

The minister urged the Muslim devotees to say their Juma prayers at home today, following the example of Saudi Arabia.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) has suspended all driving licence tests till March 31 due to the prevailing coronavirus situation.

A circular, signed by BRTA Director (engineering) Lokman Hossain Mollah, was issued in this regard yesterday.

However, other services -- issuance of registration and licence for learners -- would be available, Lokman told The Daily Star.

In another development, all bus services between Dhaka and Rajshahi have been suspended for an indefinite period as part of efforts to tackle the outbreak.

Rajshahi Transport Owners Association made the decision yesterday afternoon, our Rajshahi staff correspondent reports quoting Motiul Haque, general secretary of the association, as saying.

Buses from Dhaka to other northern districts will operate as usual.

TK 200CR TO FIGHT SPREAD

The health ministry yesterday received an allocation of Tk 200 crore in additional funds from the finance ministry for taking necessary measures to contain the spread of coronavirus in the country and to treat patients.

The finance ministry informed the health ministry about the allocation of additional funds in a letter yesterday afternoon.

Netanyahu threatens Israeli lockdown orders in coronavirus crisis

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Wednesday lockdown orders would be issued unless people stepped up compliance with guidelines urging them to stay at home to help halt the spread of the coronavirus in Israel.

In a controversial new measure for containing infections, the Health Ministry said it alerted people who had been exposed to coronavirus carriers, based on information it gleaned through "technological means" - an apparent reference to cyber-surveillance on loan from the Shin Bet counter-terrorism agency.

"Yesterday we gave clear instructions ... asking people to stay at home as much as they can and to go outside only when it's vital, for food supplies and other such needs we specified," Netanyahu said in an interview with Channel 12 TV.

But, Netanyahu said, some members of Israel's ultra-Orthodox Jewish community and "part of the minorities" - a reference to its 21-percent Arab minority - have not taken in the message.

"If the message is not understood, then I will not hesitate to impose an order."

He gave no details on the extent of any lockdown and said he would address the issue further in public remarks.

A lockdown, enforced by police under government order, would put further strain on the Israeli economy. The government has already announced a 15 billion shekel (\$4 billion) aid package to help businesses damaged by the crisis and boost health services.

Confirmed coronavirus cases in Israel numbered 433. An earlier tally on Wednesday marked a 40% jump from Tuesday.

In the interview, Netanyahu cited instances in which large weddings were held by the ultra-Orthodox community while some religious schools remained open despite a national closure of educational institutions.

The Health Ministry has limited gatherings to no more than 10 people. Many businesses have reduced staff. Restaurants have shifted to delivery-only operations and public transport has been cut back. Supermarkets remain open. On Wednesday, Israel imposed a blanket ban on entry by foreigners.

The Health Ministry said it sent text messages to around 400 people instructing them to self-isolate because they had been within infection distance of a coronavirus carrier.

The Netanyahu government fast-tracked approval for access to Israel's communications data.

Israel's Supreme Court was due yesterday to hear challenges to the Shin Bet's involvement by civil liberties activists who fear it will open the door to domestic spying.

Netanyahu said testing for coronavirus infection would be stepped up, with 3,000 tests administered daily, which will rise to 10,000 a day within two weeks.

No fatalities from the coronavirus have been reported in Israel or in the Palestinian territories to date.

But Moshe Bar Siman-Tov, the Israeli Health Ministry's director-general, told Army Radio that he expected there would be "many hundreds of new patients each day, and possibly more".

Army given charge of quarantine

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The army would then arrange for transportation of people to the quarantine centres and oversee collection of their data digitally, their meal, accommodation, and treatment provisions and ensure other necessary amenities during the quarantine period, the statement read.

Health ministry and other ministries, organisations, departments, and forces concerned would support the army in this regard, the statement added.

The army asked people to call 01769013420 and 01769013350 for information regarding Ashkona Hajj Camp and 01769013090 and 01769013062 for Uttara Diyabari camp.

Meanwhile, with four new Covid-19 cases confirmed yesterday, the authorities have moved to collect more test kits and medical equipment to deal with the outbreak of the virus.

The Central Medical Store Depot (CMSD) has already collected another 1,000 test kits. Besides, the process of collecting one lakh more kits and five lakh personal protective equipment (PPE) is underway, according to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS).

"We have ramped up our measures to collect kits and PPE. We hope to get one lakh kits and five lakh PPE soon," DGHS Director General Prof Abul Kalam Azad said at a press briefing yesterday.

He claimed that the transmission of the virus has not yet reached community level.

The latest move comes after the government's slow response to the crisis drew criticism from general people and experts who said the authorities didn't take the matter seriously.

The DGHS boss announced detection of three new cases at the briefing at the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) while the Civil Surgeon of Chuadanga confirmed another Covid-19 case.

With the four new infections, the total number of coronavirus cases in the country stands at 18.

Azad said of the four, three cases -- a 22-year-old woman, a 32-year-old man and a 65-year-old man -- are family members of an Italy returnee who recently left the country after a brief visit.

All three have been hospitalised, he said, adding that those who came into contact with them are being traced and quarantined.

At a press briefing at his office, Chuadanga Civil Surgeon ASM Maruf Hasan said the other infected person returned home from Italy on March 12 and has been kept in quarantine.

The IEDCR yesterday tested 25 new samples, taking the total number of tests to 366.

Nineteen coronavirus patients are now receiving treatment in isolation in hospitals while 42 are under institutional quarantine.

About test kits, the DG of the health directorate said Covid-19 test facilities would be extended to all divisions, except for Barishal, as it does not have labs to perform the tests.

Currently, the facility is limited only to the IEDCR due to a shortage of kits and bio-safety reasons, according to insiders.

Azad said 500 pieces of PPE were supplied to Dhaka Medical College Hospital and 10,000 to the Combined Medical Hospital in the capital.

He also urged those who returned home from abroad recently to remain in proper self-quarantine. "It is their responsibility not to expose their own family members and others to danger."

Police have already been asked to take action against those returnees who are ignoring the instruction to remain in self-quarantine, mentioned Azad.

While Azad was briefing reporters, a section of doctors of public hospitals under the banner of Doctors for Health and Environment threatened to stop working unless they are provided with PPE.

Asked, Azad said, "We have started supplying PPE and other equipment to different hospitals."

There have been media reports that doctors in many hospitals refused to treat patients with Covid-19 symptoms for not having PPE.

RAPID TEST KITS

The DGHS boss said many companies have offered to supply rapid test kits.

"But there is an issue of efficacy of these kits. Many of the kits sometimes give false results. We will send kits of some companies to WHO labs to test their efficacy. We will take decisions after getting the WHO's feedback," Azad said.

Meanwhile, the Directorate General

of Drug Administration (DGDA) yesterday issued no objection certificate (NOC) to Gonoshasthaya Kendra, allowing it to import nine types of chemicals from the UK to produce rapid test kits.

Earlier, Gonoshasthaya announced it had developed a new kit that can detect a novel coronavirus case within minutes.

"The DGDA sat with the representatives from the IEDCR, the DGHS and other organisations today [yesterday] in this regard. Further directive has been sought from the health ministry," Sabrina Alam, drug super of the DGDA told The Daily Star.

LEAVE CANCELLED

Leave of all health officials and staffers has been cancelled because of the coronavirus outbreak, Health Minister Zahid Maleque said at a press conference yesterday.

"All the physicians, officials, nurses and other staffers concerned will not get any leave until further directive," he said, reports UNB.

9 RETURNÉES SENT TO HOSPITAL

The Dhaka airport authorities yesterday sent nine returnees from Oman, Kuwait, Qatar and Saudi Arabia to the Kuwait-Bangladesh Maitree Hospital as they had high fever.

Group Captain AHM Touhid-ul-Ahsan, director of Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, confirmed this to reporters.

On average, 7,000 people arrive at the airport every day, he said citing data collected over the last few days.