

NEWS IN brief

Sri Lanka puts off parliamentary polls

Sri Lanka has indefinitely postponed parliamentary elections that were scheduled for next month to curb the spread of the new coronavirus.

Muslim event in Indonesia stopped

A rally of Muslim pilgrims that is drawing thousands of people to Indonesia has been stopped amid fears that it could help spread the new coronavirus, an official said.

Philippines to ban entry of foreigners

The Philippines is stopping the issuance of visas to foreigners, banning all nationalities from entering the country to halt the spread of coronavirus, its foreign minister said yesterday.



A father ties a facemask on his daughter amid concerns over the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus as she attends the first day of her tenth class examinations in Secunderabad, the twin city of Hyderabad, India yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Pak confirms first two virus deaths

More than 250 cases reported

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani officials announced late Wednesday the country's first two confirmed fatalities due to the novel coronavirus, after two men died in the north of the country.

Taimur Saleem Jhagra, the health minister for Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, where both victims died, told AFP the men had recently travelled internationally.

The first patient, a 50-year-old man, died in a hospital in Mardan district near Peshawar after visiting Saudi Arabia earlier this month.

"It's the first death from coronavirus in (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) and sadly in the country too," Jhagra said, noting the patient's family had been placed in quarantine.

Jhagra also announced the death of a 36-year-old man old from Hangu district.

"He arrived from Turkey via Dubai ... he tested positive on March 17 and died today in the hospital," Jhagra said.

As of Wednesday, Pakistan had tested at least 1,621 people for COVID-19, with more than 250 positive cases.

Observers fear the disease could spread quickly in the country of 215 million people, where health care is frequently inadequate.

Pakistan's porous borders, creaking hospitals, culture of hand shaking and hugging, and large illiterate populations in crowded urban centres mean containing the crisis could be a huge challenge.

To prevent the virus's transmission Islamabad has ordered both the Afghan and Iranian borders sealed, wedding halls shuttered, and schools closed across the country for the remainder of the month.

However large public gatherings, including Friday prayers, have not been cancelled and malls and markets remain open.

Modi orders Sunday curfew

Tells people to avoid panic buying, stay at home as fourth Covid-19 death reported in Punjab

AGENCIES

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday ordered the country's 1.3 billion population to follow a one-day curfew to combat the coronavirus pandemic.

Modi said in an address to the nation that the curfew would be on Sunday from 7:00am to 9:00pm to test the giant country's ability to take tough measures against what he called a growing crisis.

The measure would be "in the interest of the country to follow and prepare us for future challenges."

India has reported 173 positive virus cases and four deaths.

The Prime Minister said the government formed task force to assess coronavirus impact on economy. He appealed citizens to stop panic buying, avoid hoarding essential goods as steps taken to ensure no shortage of essential.

"I request all traders - small or large - to also look after the welfare of those whose services you utilise," he said.

He requested people to avoid going to hospital for routine checks, postpone elective surgeries and stay indoors for coming weeks, reports TNN.

"Only if it is absolutely essential, speak to your friendly doctors on

CORONAVIRUS BATTLE

Govt declares restricted movement order effective till March 31

Orders its employees to work from home till April 4

phone," he said.

Earlier, the government has declared restricted movement order from 18 to 31 March 2020. The order has come into effect from 12 midnight, 18 March 2020. This was conveyed by an administration notification.

The National Security Council had a coordination meeting between government agencies on 17 March 2020 to ensure the smooth implementation of the Order.

The government has also ordered its employees to work from home in a staggered manner - 50 percent of Group B and C employees will attend office while the rest will log in from their homes - as part of its measures to combat the outbreak.

"All Heads of Departments (HoDs) are advised to draft a weekly roster of duty for Group B and C staff and ask them to attend office on alternate weeks," the notification said.

The staggered hours consist of three time slots: 9:00 am to 5:30 pm, 9:30 am to 6:00 pm and 10:00 am to 6:30 pm. The work from home orders will be in effect till April 4.

The government also blocked roads in Kashmir yesterday after the insurgency-torn region reported its first case of coronavirus, reports Reuters.

'Prepare for worst'

Warns WHO chief as first virus death reported in Sub-Saharan Africa's Burkina Faso

AFP, Ouagadougou

Sub-Saharan Africa has recorded its first COVID-19 death, a high-ranking politician in Burkina Faso, as the head of the World Health Organisation urged the continent to "prepare for the worst".

"Africa should wake up," Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told a news conference in Geneva on Wednesday, pointing out that "in other countries, we have seen how the virus actually accelerates after a certain tipping point".

Africa has lagged behind the global curve for coronavirus infections and deaths, but in the past few days has seen a significant rise in cases.

Experts have repeatedly warned about the perils for the continent, given its weak health infrastructure, poverty, conflicts, poor sanitation and urban crowding.

Medical authorities in the poor Sahel state of Burkina Faso announced Wednesday that the number of infections there had risen by seven to 27 -- and that one of them, a 62-year-old diabetic woman, had died overnight.

The country's main opposition party, the Union for Progress and Change (UPC), said in a statement that the victim was its lawmaker Rose-Marie Compaore, the first vice president of the parliament.

South Africa, the continent's most industrialised economy, reported a more than one-third jump in cases, with 31 new infections bringing its tally to 116.

Nearby Zambia announced its first two confirmed cases -- a couple that returned to the capital Lusaka from a 10-day holiday in France.

As of Wednesday, a tally of reported cases compiled by AFP stood at more than 600 for all of Africa.

Of these, 16 cases have been fatal: six in Egypt, six in Algeria, two in Morocco, one in Sudan and one in Burkina Faso. Those figures are relatively small compared to the rest of world -- the global death toll has passed 8,800 with almost 210,000 total infections.

WHO chief Tedros said sub-Saharan Africa had recorded 233 infections, but warned the official numbers likely did not reflect the full picture.



PHOTO: AFP

Malaysia trying to track down 2,000 Rohingyas

670 cases in SE Asia linked to the gathering

REUTERS, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian authorities are trying to track down an estimated 2,000 Rohingya who attended a Muslim religious gathering that led to a spike in coronavirus cases across Southeast Asia, a security source and two other people familiar with the matter said.

More than 100,000 Rohingyas live in Malaysia after fleeing from Myanmar, but they are considered illegal immigrants.

Their status would likely make many of them reluctant to identify themselves to get tested for the coronavirus even if they showed symptoms, other sources in the Rohingya community said.

Malaysia's search for the Rohingyas highlights the challenge for governments trying to track the virus among communities living without official papers and wary of

authorities. The religious gathering late last month at a mosque on the outskirts of the Malaysian capital Kuala Lumpur was attended by some 16,000 people, including the Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar, one source said.

As well as the Rohingya and other refugees and undocumented migrants, about 1,500 Muslims from across Asia attended.

More than 670 coronavirus cases in Southeast Asia have been linked to the gathering, including 576 in Malaysia, 61 in Brunei, 22 in Cambodia, five in Singapore, seven in Thailand, and one each in Vietnam and the Philippines.

Malaysia has 900 coronavirus cases in all, the highest in Southeast Asia.

Malaysian authorities have been tracking down the participants but say they have been unable to find about 4,000 of them.

MOSQUE OUTBREAK

Malaysia has 900 cases in all, the highest in Southeast Asia



A bank staff member takes the temperature of a client as people beat the deadline for the last day of payment for private medical insurance coverage for Covid-19 coronavirus illness and death, in Bangkok, Thailand yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

NIRBHAYA RAPE CASE

Four convicts to be hanged today

PTI, New Delhi

The Delhi court yesterday dismissed the plea of three of the four death-row convicts in the Nirbhaya gang-rape and murder case seeking stay on the execution which is slated for early morning today.

Additional Sessions Judge Dharmender Rana dismissed the plea of Akshay Kumar, Pawan Gupta and Vinay Sharma seeking stay on the death penalty, saying the second mercy plea of one of them was still pending.

The court was informed by the public prosecutor that second mercy pleas of Akshay and Pawan, were rejected on the ground that the first such plea was entertained and considered on merit.

He told the court that advocate A P Singh, counsel for the convicts, was giving false information stating second mercy plea of Pawan was pending and said that all the convicts have exhausted their legal remedies.

Singh also said that convict Akshay's wife has filed for a divorce in a city court in Bihar which was pending, to which the special public prosecutor said any other petition does not fall under the purview of legal remedy in the present case.

On March 5, a trial court had issued fresh death warrants for March 20 at 5:30 am, as the date for the execution of convicts Mukesh Singh (32), Pawan Gupta (25), Vinay Sharma (26) and Akshay Kumar Singh (31).

Three previous dates of hanging passed as the convicts filed petition after petition to stall their execution.

On December 16, 2012, a 23-year-old was brutally assaulted and tortured in a moving bus and dumped on the road, by six people including a juvenile. The woman died a few days later.

'Time is of the essence'

US presses Afghan govt, Taliban to move ahead with urgent prisoner swap amid coronavirus outbreak

AFP, Washington

The United States on Wednesday pressed the Afghan government and Taliban to move ahead with a delayed plan to free prisoners, saying the coronavirus crisis created urgency.

The US signed a February 29 deal with the Taliban that set in motion the withdrawal of forces and called for the release of captives ahead of talks between the Islamist insurgents and the Kabul government.

But the internationally recognized government, which was already reluctant, has put off the release, saying Kabul needed time to review the identities of prisoners.

"The United States would like to see prisoner releases begin as soon as possible in line with the US-Taliban agreement," said Zalmay Khalilzad, the US negotiator who brokered the deal with the Taliban.

"Coronavirus makes prisoner releases urgent; time is of the essence," he wrote on Twitter.

He said that the global pandemic meant the two sides would likely need to hold talks virtually, although he still

voiced hope for a face-to-face meeting.

He had earlier called for the insurgents and government representatives to meet in Qatar, the site of a year of US-Taliban negotiations, to agree on the logistics of the prisoner swap.

Khalilzad said that the Taliban, who have not renounced violence against the government, have agreed to the key demand of the government that freed guerrillas not return to battle.

"The Taliban commit that released prisoners will abide by the commitments made in the peace agreement and not return to the battlefield. A violation will undermine the peace process," Khalilzad said.

The Taliban have demanded the release of 5,000 prisoners before meeting with the government for talks, which Norway had offered to hold starting March 10.

President Ashraf Ghani had agreed to release 1,500 captives with the remaining 3,500 to be freed as negotiations begin.

But the Taliban rejected the offer and the government's release of prisoners did not begin as decreed on Saturday.



Australia, New Zealand seal borders in bid to stem virus

AFP, Sydney

Australia and New Zealand moved to seal off their borders yesterday, announcing unprecedented bans on entry for non-residents in the hope of stemming the rise of COVID-19 infections.

The announcement came as Australia's biggest airline Qantas said it would halt all international flights for at least two months and suspend two-thirds of staff in response to the pandemic, while the country's central bank cut interest rates to record lows.

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said the ban on anyone who is not a citizen or permanent resident coming to Australia will be in place from this evening.

A similar measure was announced by his New Zealand counterpart Jacinda Ardern, who acknowledged: "I recognise how extraordinary this is. In no time in New Zealand's history has a power like this been used."

Australia and New Zealand had already announced a slew of restrictions to tackle the pandemic, but have so far stopped short of closing schools or instituting

wider-ranging lockdowns.

Policymakers hope the bans will slow the rate of infection enough to avoid more draconian measures that would cripple the two economies and transform life for months to come.

Australia currently has 709 confirmed cases of coronavirus, with the total doubling roughly every three days. New Zealand has 28 cases.

Morrison said around 80 percent of Australia's coronavirus cases came from "someone who has contracted the virus overseas or someone who has had direct contact with someone who has returned from overseas".

A recent opinion poll showed 69 percent of Australians back closing the border. Ardern said the measures would also ban visa holders.

"Today's decision stops any tourist, or temporary visa holder such as students or temporary workers, from coming to and entering into New Zealand."

Earlier Qantas said all of its international flights would be suspended by late March for at least two months.