

Stay home for three months
UK tells 1.5m people most at risk

AFP, London

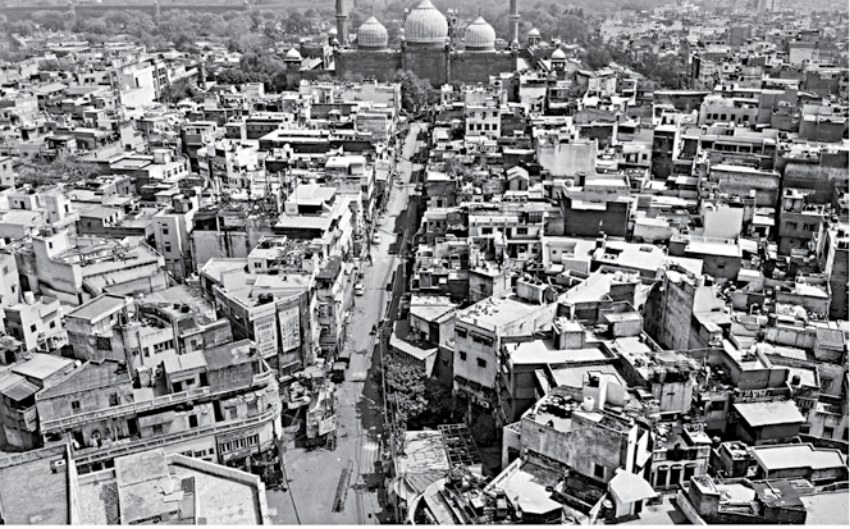
Up to 1.5 million vulnerable people in Britain, identified as being most at risk from the coronavirus epidemic, should stay at home for at least 12 weeks, the government said yesterday.

Those with underlying health conditions such as bone or blood cancers, cystic fibrosis, or who have had an organ transplant have been advised by health officials to do all they can to shield themselves from the virus, including confining themselves at home for a long period.

"People should stay at home, protect our NHS and save lives," Communities secretary Robert Jenrick said in a statement.

He added that the government was asking "extremely vulnerable individuals" to take "extra steps to shield themselves".

Paul Johnstone, director of Public Health England, said those contacted should "not go out for shopping, for leisure or for travel".



This combination of pictures taken yesterday shows deserted areas during a one-day nationwide Janata (civil) curfew imposed as a preventive measure against the Covid-19 coronavirus (clockwise) near the Jama Masjid mosque in New Delhi, JJ bridge in Mumbai, the Haji Ali Dargah in Mumbai and the statue of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in Amritsar.

PHOTO: AFP

Asia steps up efforts

Tighter travel restrictions imposed in several countries as second wave of infections strike

AGENCIES

Authorities across Asia ramped up efforts this weekend to stem the coronavirus amid fears of a second wave of infections in places where outbreaks had appeared under control.

Tighter travel restrictions were imposed in several countries while Malaysia deployed its army to enforce a lockdown as the number of cases in the region soared past 95,000 -- a third of the world's infections, an AFP tally shows.

Outside China -- where the virus was first detected in December and infected more than 80,000 people -- South Korea is the hardest-hit country in Asia with over 8,500 cases.

While China says it has drastically reduced the number of domestically transmitted cases -- the one reported yesterday was the first in four days -- it is seeing a steady rise in imported cases, mostly

from Chinese people returning from overseas.

Cases rose by roughly a third in Thailand overnight to nearly 600, fuelling scepticism about claims in neighbouring Myanmar and Laos of zero infections.

Three doctors treating virus patients in Indonesia died, taking the country's death toll to 48 with 514 confirmed infections.

Pakistan suspended international flights in a desperate bid to prevent the virus spreading in a country with more than 300 reported cases. Millions of people in India were in lockdown yesterday as the government tests the country's ability to fight the pandemic.

In Hong Kong the number of cases has nearly doubled in the past week as more people fly back to the financial hub.

Prison guards opened fire on inmates in Sri Lanka's north after they tried to break out in protest over a ban on family visits to prevent spread of virus.

Lockdowns not enough to defeat coronavirus: WHO

Calls for health measures to avoid resurgence

REUTERS, London

Countries can't simply lock down their societies to defeat coronavirus, the World Health Organization's top emergency expert said yesterday, adding that public health measures are needed to avoid a resurgence of the virus later on.

"What we really need to focus on is finding those who are sick, those who have the virus, and isolate them, find their contacts and isolate them," Mike Ryan said in an interview on the BBC's Andrew Marr Show.

"The danger right now with the lockdowns ... if we don't put in place the strong public health measures now, when those movement restrictions and lockdowns are lifted, the danger is the disease will jump back up."

Much of Europe and the United States have followed China and other Asian countries and introduced drastic restrictions to fight the new coronavirus,

with most workers told to work from home and schools, bars, pubs and restaurants being closed.

Ryan said that the examples of China, Singapore and South Korea, which coupled restrictions with rigorous measures to test every possible suspect, provided a model for Europe, which the WHO has said has replaced Asia as the epicentre of the pandemic.

"Once we've suppressed the transmission, we have to go after the virus. We have to take the fight to the virus," Ryan said.

Ryan also said that several vaccines were in development, but only one had begun trials in the United States. Asked how long it would take before there was a vaccine available in Britain, he said that people needed to be realistic.

"We have to make sure that it's absolutely safe... we are talking at least a year," he said.

"The vaccines will come, but we need to get out and do what we need to do now."



Personal ties not enough, North Korea tells US

Donald Trump has sent a letter to Kim Jong Un detailing a plan to develop ties, state media reported citing the North Korean leader's powerful sister, but she warned their good personal relationship is not enough, as a hiatus in disarmament talks drags on. "In the letter, he (Trump)... explained his plan to propel the relations between the two countries and expressed his intent to render cooperation in the anti-epidemic work," an apparent reference to the coronavirus pandemic, Kim Yo Jong said in the statement. If the US continued to pursue its "unilateral and greedy intention", she said, relations between the two countries would continue to deteriorate.

Infections jump across Africa

Rwanda imposed a nationwide shutdown and border controls to combat the coronavirus at the weekend in some of the strictest measures taken in Africa, as infections spread across the continent and authorities warn healthcare systems are ill-equipped to cope. 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. The continent has now reported more than 1,100 infections -- more than 1,000 of them in sub-Saharan Africa -- as the World Health Organization expresses concern that poor sanitation, urban crowding and the lack of intensive-care units, equipment and trained staff could hamper any response.



US help offer baffles Iran

The offer by the United States to help Iran fight the coronavirus pandemic is strange, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said in a televised speech yesterday, rejecting the offer. Despite heightened tensions between the longtime foes, Washington has offered humanitarian assistance to Iran while it struggles with the coronavirus outbreak. Iran is the most-affected country in the Middle East with over 1,500 coronavirus deaths and 20,610 infected people. Khamenei said the Islamic Republic had the capability to overcome the crisis.

SOURCE: AFP

Is China a model for the world?

AFP, Beijing

The head of the World Health Organization believes China's battle with the coronavirus offers a beacon of hope, but others question whether Beijing's strategy can be followed by other countries -- particularly Western democracies.

China has reported only one new local infection over the past four days, a seemingly remarkable turnaround given the chaos that surrounded the initial outbreak in the city of Wuhan.

While some experts caution against accepting Beijing's figures at face value, WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus insisted China's success "provides hope for the rest of the world".

But China is a particular case -- a centrally-controlled, one-party authoritarian state that allows no dissent and can mobilise vast resources on a single issue.

CLOSE DOWN AND CONTAIN

In January, China effectively shut down Wuhan and placed its 11 million residents in effective quarantine -- a move it then replicated in the rest of Hubei province, putting 50 million



people in mass isolation.

Across the rest of the country, residents were strongly encouraged to stay at home. Hundreds of millions of Chinese live in closed residential complexes where neighbourhood committees can police movement in and out -- meaning compliance could be closely monitored.

"Containment works," Sharon Lewin, professor of medicine at the University of Melbourne, told AFP.

Extreme social distancing and home quarantines have been used to

differing degrees by a rising number of European countries, with some US states following suit.

MASS MOBILISATION

At least 42,000 doctors and medical personnel were sent to Hubei province to shore up the province's health services which had, according to public health professor Zheng Zijie from Peking University, essentially "collapsed" under the strain of the fast-spreading epidemic.

China's ability to mobilise small armies of medical workers did not come

with protection from contagion. More than 3,300 medical staff were infected across the country and 13 have died from Covid-19, according to health ministry figures published early March.

Government efforts in China were backed by an arsenal of propaganda calling on citizens to be hygienic and stay home.

MASKS AND CHECKS

Widespread mask use may have helped slow the spread of the disease, "particularly when there are so many asymptomatic virus carriers", Zheng said. During the crisis China produced up to 1.6 million N95 respirator masks per day. These are considered the most effective protection, but need to fit correctly and be changed often.

To boost detection rates, temperature checkpoints were installed outside buildings and shops, or in public places. Many localities require citizens to show a QR code on their phone that rates them as "green", "yellow" or "red".

This assessment is now an entrance requirement for many businesses. Government announcements made clear coding system will remain in use in some form even after the pandemic subsides.

Gaza confirms first two cases

AFP, Gaza City

Authorities in Gaza yesterday confirmed the first two cases of novel coronavirus, identifying them as Palestinians who had travelled to Pakistan and were being held in quarantine since their return. The United Nations has warned that a Covid-19 outbreak in Gaza could be disastrous, given the high poverty rates and weak health system in the coastal strip under Israeli blockade since 2007.



India to test for virus at 111 labs

IANS, New Delhi

At least 111 labs will conduct test for diagnosis of coronavirus across India, the ministry of health and family welfare said on Saturday. These testing labs include both government and private sectors. However, the capping the prices of the tests is still under discussion. The testing labs have been designated by the apex research body in India, Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR).

China sends millions of masks to Czechs

AFP, Prague

A giant cargo plane carrying over 100 tons of medical material from China, including millions of face masks, has landed at a Czech airport, the defence ministry said yesterday. The Czech Republic, which by yesterday had 1,047 confirmed coronavirus cases including six cured patients and no deaths, has been grappling with a shortage of face masks and disinfectants.

Air quality improving

AFP, Paris

Air quality is improving in countries under coronavirus quarantines, experts say, but it is far too early to speak of long-term change.

Images taken by the US space agency Nasa in February showed the concentration of nitrogen dioxide (NO2) fell dramatically in Wuhan, China, the epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic.

NO2 is mainly produced by vehicles, industrial sites and thermal power stations. As China moves past the peak of its crisis, however, recent images by the European Space Agency (ESA) show a resurgence in NO2 emissions.

A striking reduction has also been observed by the ESA in northern Italy, which has been locked down to fight a spread of the novel coronavirus, which causes COVID-19.

The European Environment Agency (EEA) reports a similar change in Barcelona and Madrid, where Spanish authorities issued confinement orders in mid March.

In northern Italy, "average NO2 concentration levels have been almost halved on average," Peuch

remarked.

As for other countries or regions that have told inhabitants to remain confined at home, notably Argentina, Bavaria, Belgium, California, France and Tunisia, specialists are poring over the data to see if the trend is similar.

Meanwhile, less NO2 does not necessarily mean purer air. Beijing experienced episodes of pollution owing to fine particles in February, Nasa's Earth Observatory reported.

The air in Paris was also rated as moderately polluted Friday owing to the presence of fine particles and NO2 even though the population had already been confined at home for three days.

Confinement measures protect in two ways, by reducing the risk of COVID-19 infection and by easing pollution from road traffic, according to a group of French doctors known as Air-Sante-climate.

It is nonetheless hard to know how much benefit the world's population will actually experience. According to the health experts, that will depend on how long the measures will last.

QUARANTINE ACROSS THE GLOBE

