

Trump deploys emergency beds

US has almost 33,000 confirmed cases of Covid-19, with 409 deaths

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump ordered thousands of emergency hospital beds set up at American coronavirus hotspots but a trillion-dollar economic rescue package crashed, as pandemic deaths soared across the globe.

"We're at war, in a true sense we're at war," Trump said on Sunday as he ordered emergency medical stations with 4,000 beds to be deployed to California and other worst-hit areas.

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More than a third of Americans are under various forms of lockdown, including in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles, but the number of infections in the United States has continued to climb.

Trump told reporters during his now-daily White House briefing on the pandemic that the federal government would pay for National Guard soldiers to be deployed in the three states to help contain the spread of the virus.

He added that the US Army Corps of Engineers would help build the temporary medical sites in New York and that the US Navy hospital ship USNS Mercy would be deployed to Los Angeles.

Highlighting the desperation inside the world's biggest economy, the mayor of New York said his city was just 10 days away from running out of ventilators.



A woman shows her documents before entering a train, as Italy tightens measures to try and contain the spread of coronavirus disease, at Rome's Termini train station, Italy yesterday. Inset, volunteers distribute hand sanitizer in Siliguri, India.

PHOTO: REUTERS, AFP

SE Asian nations consider more emergency powers

3,700 infected across the region with nearly 100 deaths

REUTERS, Manila

Southeast Asian countries considered more emergency powers yesterday to tackle the threat of the coronavirus as Singapore Airlines said it was grounding almost all of fleet in the face of the "greatest challenge" it has ever faced.

The virus has infected about 3,700 people across Southeast Asia, with nearly 100 deaths, more than half of them in the region's most populous country, Indonesia.

The Philippines has confirmed 396 cases and 33 deaths. But health officials acknowledge limited testing for the coronavirus means, that like Indonesia, its already overstretched health system could be facing far more infections than the numbers indicate.

Governments are scrambling to raise their defences with border closures, entry bans and lockdowns.

The Philippine Congress held a special session to consider allowing the government powers including taking control of private utilities, telecoms and transport operators or businesses in the public

interest, and forcing hotels and other venues to accommodate medical workers or quarantine people.

"It is a step we were reluctant to take, but the circumstances and the experience of nations worldwide convinced us that we have no other choice," Duterte's Executive Secretary Salvador Medialdea told a near-empty Congress, with most lawmakers streaming the session at home.

The Philippines was the first Southeast Asian country to adopt lockdown measures, with borders closed to foreigners and tens of millions of people in home quarantine.

But more are following suit as cases soar, with Vietnam and Malaysia deploying soldiers to help with quarantines or to enforce curbs on travel and gatherings.

Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin said the government may consider extending movement restrictions by up to two weeks, and would announce more economic stimulus to soften the blow from the coronavirus and weak oil prices.

Thailand reported 122 new cases yesterday, taking its total to 721, a health ministry spokesman said.

Back to work in Wuhan

Restrictions eased in China's virus epicentre as no new local cases reported

AFP, Beijing

People in central China where the coronavirus was first detected are allowed to go back to work and public transport is restarting, as some normality slowly returns after a two-month lockdown.

The easing of restrictions in Wuhan city comes as Chinese health officials yesterday reported no new local cases of the deadly virus, but confirmed another 39 infections brought from overseas.

Wuhan residents considered healthy can move around the city and take the bus or metro so long as they show ID, officials said.

They can also go back to work if they have a permit from their employer, and leave the city for other parts of the surrounding Hubei province after being tested for the virus and receiving a health certificate.

The virus, which emerged in a market that sold wild animals in December, sparked a dramatic lockdown of the city on January 23 that was then widened to the rest of the province of nearly 60 million people.

Since then infections have slowed

dramatically and for five straight days there have been no new cases in Hubei.

Another nine people died in Wuhan, the National Health Commission said yesterday in its latest update.

The easing of restrictions follows Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to the city earlier this month -- his first since the crisis erupted.

As the rate of infection slows in China, the rest of the world has stepped up measures to try and battle the raging pandemic.

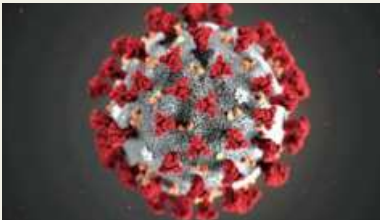
China is anxious about an influx of infections brought in from other countries, with the number of imported cases climbing steadily in recent weeks to pass 350.

Of the 39 new cases reported yesterday, 10 were in Shanghai and 10 were in Beijing.

Many cities have brought in tough rules to quarantine new arrivals.

Authorities have said all Beijing-bound international flights will be diverted to other cities where they will be screened for the virus to help make the process more efficient.

COVID-19 UPDATES



Two more doctors die in France

Two more doctors have died after contracting the coronavirus in France, officials said yesterday, a day after the country reported the first death of a doctor treating Covid-19 patients. One of the doctors, a 66-year-old gynaecologist in Mulhouse near the border with Switzerland and Germany, was infected by a patient during a consultation, according to his clinic. The other was a 60-year-old general practitioner at a hospital in Saint-Avold near Metz, further north along the German frontier, according to the town's mayor. Both died on Sunday when officials announced the death of a 67-year-old doctor who was among the first to treat coronavirus cases in the northern Oise department, which has been badly hit by the outbreak. Health experts warn that many French hospitals are already overflowing with coronavirus cases.

India grounds all domestic passenger flights

India will ground all domestic passenger flights from today to combat the spread of the novel coronavirus, the government said, as more states ordered lockdowns. India has already banned incoming international flights and sealed most of its land borders. The government information bureau said only cargo flights will be allowed. Domestic Indian carriers carried some 144 million passengers last year. "Covid-19 pandemic is crippling the global economy and aviation including India's once-booming aviation sector for years to come," Devesh Agarwal, the editor of the Bangalore Aviation website, told AFP. "This is not a short-term pandemic and the outlook for Indian aviation looks tragic. The aviation sector in India is decimated right now. This is similar worldwide."

UN to create global corona fund: Norway

Norway said yesterday it wanted to start a United Nations donors' fund to help poor countries fight the new coronavirus pandemic. "We are concerned about the way the virus will affect developing countries which have fragile healthcare systems," Norway's Development Aid Minister Dag-Inge Ulstein said in a statement. "International solidarity across borders is more important than ever. That's why it is important for us to contribute financially to such a fund in the UN," he added. The fund is expected to be set up quickly, "possibly even this week," Norway said, without specifying the amount of its own contribution. The initiative has been welcomed favourably by UN deputy secretary general Amina Mohammed, Oslo said.

SOURCE: AFP



Merkel goes into self-quarantine

Chancellor Angela Merkel was on Sunday in quarantine after meeting a doctor who tested positive for the novel coronavirus, as Germany further tightens rules on public gatherings and plots a taboo-breaking package of support for Europe's top economy. News of Merkel's potential exposure to the virus came minutes after she announced a ban on public gatherings of more than two people and further infection control measures. "The Chancellor has decided to quarantine herself immediately at home. She will be tested regularly in the coming days... (and) fulfil her official business from home," spokesman Steffen Seibert said in a statement.

Pompeo visits Kabul amid multiple crises

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo arrived in the Afghan capital yesterday to help break a poisonous political deadlock that has further riven the country just as the Taliban are increasing attacks and a rise in coronavirus cases threatens an already-floundering peace process. Afghanistan has been enmeshed in a political crisis since elections last year left the country in disarray due to numerous fraud claims that ultimately saw two men claiming the presidency and holding separate inaugurations. Pompeo was to hold both separate and joint meetings with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani -- the election's official winner -- along with his archrival Abdullah Abdullah, who also claims the presidency.

Weinstein tests positive

Disgraced Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein has tested positive for the novel coronavirus, US media reported Sunday. Weinstein, 68, is in prison in northern New York state after being sentenced to 23 years in jail for rape and sexual assault. The fallen film producer's diagnosis was reported Sunday evening by celebrity news website TMZ and local paper the Niagara Gazette. Weinstein's spokespeople have declined to comment to US media on the subject. The New York State Department of Corrections did not respond when contacted by AFP for confirmation of the reports. Sources told TMZ that Weinstein was one of two inmates to test positive at the high-security Wende Correctional Facility northwest of New York City.

SOURCE: AFP

Prison riot kills 23 in Colombia

AFP, Montevideo

Panic over the spread of the coronavirus sparked a prison riot in Colombia that killed 23 inmates on Sunday, as Chile became the latest Latin American country to announce restrictions on movement.

Rioting swept through the crowded jail overnight in the Colombian capital Bogota amid rising tensions over the virus in the penitentiary system.

Justice Minister Margarita Cabello described the violence as an attempted mass breakout, part of what she said was a coordinated plan with inmates who caused disturbances in 13 jails across the country.

The minister rejected accusations by rights groups that the riots were sparked by unsanitary conditions inside a prison system that was woefully unprepared to face the pandemic.

A curfew in Chile "will take effect throughout the national territory from 10:00 pm to 05:00 am the next day," Health Minister Jaime Manalich announced Sunday. The country, which has 632 infections, registered its first death from the pandemic at the weekend.

Ecuador, which has seen the region's second-greatest number of deaths after Brazil, marked its highest daily increase on Sunday, doubling to 14 dead and 789 positive cases.

Quito on Sunday ordered the military to take control of the worst-hit province of Guayas in the south-west of the country.

UK scientists to track mutations in coronavirus to map spread

REUTERS, London

UK scientists are to track the spread of the new coronavirus and watch for emerging mutations by using gene sequencing to analyse the strains causing thousands of Covid-19 infections across the country, Britain said yesterday.

Researchers will collect data from samples from infected patients in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, the government said in a statement.

At least 281 Britons have died from Covid-19, the disease caused by the new coronavirus that has spread around the world in a pandemic.

"This virus is one of the biggest threats our nation has faced in recent times, and crucial to helping us fight it is understanding how it is spreading," said Sharon Peacock, director of Public Health England's (PHE) national infection service.

Working in teams across Britain, scientists will map out and analyse the full genetic codes of the Covid-19 samples.

"Genomic sequencing will help us understand Covid-19 and its spread. It can also help guide treatments in the future and see the impact of interventions," Patrick Vallance, the government's

chief scientific adviser, said in the statement.

In epidemics, genome sequencing can help scientists monitor small changes in the virus at a national or international scale to understand how it is spreading and whether different strains are emerging.

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The 20 million pound (\$23 million) project, called the Covid-19 Genomics UK Consortium, will be co-led by the Wellcome Sanger Institute, which specialises in genetic research, PHE and other public health agencies, as well as the National Health Service and several academic institutions.

"All viruses accumulate mutations over time, some faster than others," said Paul Klenerman, a professor at Oxford University who will be involved in the work. "For Covid-19, this has only just begun - but this emerging variation can be tracked in detail."



A public order agency officer sprays disinfectant over a woman before she enters a local government office as a precautionary move against the spread of the Covid-19 coronavirus in Surabaya, Indonesia yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Online teachers boosting incomes

REUTERS, Manila

Filipino teacher Raven Kate De Leon is in demand, spending up to 10 hours a day at her home computer surrounded by mini cars and stuffed toys that she uses as props to inject fun into her English classes for students far away in China.

Since the coronavirus took a hold in China at the start of this year and forced schools and offices to shut down, thousands of Filipino teachers are cashing on overtime as grade schoolers and professionals in China, Japan and beyond turn lockdowns into opportunities to better their English.

One of only a few countries in Asia that can combine affordable e-learning with an ample supply of teachers and strong English proficiency, the Philippines is uniquely placed to absorb demand in Asia for Internet language classes.

Online platforms like 51Talk of China Online Education Group and RareJob Philippines, and a host of smaller local Philippine outfits, have seen demand and usage soar since February, bucking the devastating effect on the world's economies from coronavirus, which has infected more than 337,500 people and killed more than 14,500.

"I usually have 20 classes every day, so I could meet the demand of the great number of students nowadays," said De Leon, 22, who works for 51Talk.

De Leon is currently now working from 8:00 am to 11:00 pm, without a day off.

NEWSIN brief

Brussels police fine hundreds in parks

AFP, Brussels

Police in Belgium's capital have handed out hundreds of fines to residents ignoring lockdown rules in city parks, as restrictions intensify to slow the spread of the coronavirus outbreak. Officers handed out nearly 300 fines on Sunday in green spaces and around 100 per day for each of the preceding three days, Brussels police said.

Greece calls for health volunteers

AFP, Athens

Greece yesterday put out a call for health volunteers to help combat the spread of the coronavirus, a government official said. There are 17 recorded deaths and 624 officially announced infections from the coronavirus in Greece, which has a population of 11 million. "The volunteer programme is addressed to whoever can offer services, such as doctors, medical staff, psychologists, medical students and retired health scientists," a government spokeswoman said.

Cuban doctors head to Italy

REUTERS, Havana

Communist-run Cuba said it dispatched a brigade of doctors and nurses to Italy for the first time this weekend to help in the fight against the novel coronavirus at the request of the worst-affected region Lombardy. The Caribbean island has sent its "armies of white robes" to disaster sites around the world largely in poor countries since its 1959 revolution.