

PROTECTING GLOBAL ECONOMY

G7 pledges to 'do whatever necessary'

AFP, Washington

G7 finance ministers and central bank chiefs yesterday vowed to "do whatever is necessary" to safeguard jobs and the economy from disruptions caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

The officials said they are working cooperatively with "substantial and complementary packages" to help companies weather the impact.

"We will do whatever is necessary to restore confidence and economic growth and to protect jobs, businesses, and the resilience of the financial system," the group said in a statement released in Washington.

The statement came as Wall Street rebounded at the open, with the Dow Jones Industrial Average up 6.7 percent on expectations the US Congress would soon pass a trillion-dollar stimulus package.

Last week, leaders of the G7 comprising Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the United States issued a similar statement vowing to protect economic growth, while warning the outbreak poses "major risks for the world economy."

That prediction appears to have born fruit, with some forecasters predicting the global economy could shrink 1.5 percent this year and the US seen as facing a staggering 14 percent contraction.

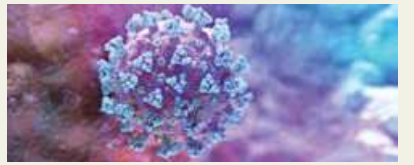
In their statement, the finance and central bank heads called on all countries to take "liquidity support and fiscal expansion" measures, and said they would coordinate weekly on their own moves.



A general view shows Serbian military personal setting up beds inside a hall at the Belgrade Fair to accommodate people suffering from mild symptoms of the coronavirus disease, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

CORONAVIRUS EPIDEMIC



LATEST UPDATES

2.6 BILLION UNDER LOCKDOWN

An estimated 2.6 billion people are now confined to their homes, according to an AFP tally. The majority are hemmed in by obligatory government lockdown orders while others are under curfew, in quarantine or heeding advice not to leave their homes. France tightens its rules, strictly limiting physical exercise and closing most open-air markets. It warns the lockdown could still last "several more weeks". South Africa announces a three-week lockdown to begin Thursday. Egypt imposes a night-time curfew for two weeks from Wednesday. Cuba will quarantine foreign tourists from Tuesday when it seals its borders.

MORE THAN 380,000 CASES

At least 16,961 deaths have been recorded since the virus first emerged in December, according to an AFP tally compiled at 1100 GMT on Tuesday based on official sources. More than 386,353 declared cases have been registered in 175 countries and territories. Italy has most deaths with 6,077, out of 63,927 declared infections. Mainland China has 3,270 deaths out of 81,171 cases. The worst-hit countries after Italy and China are Spain with 2,696 fatalities and 39,673 cases, followed by Iran with 1,934 fatalities and 24,811 cases, France with 860 deaths and 19,856 cases, and the United States with 499 deaths and 46,440 cases.

TOKYO OLYMPICS POSTPONED TO 2021

The International Olympic Committee announces the 2020 Tokyo Games will be postponed to no later than the summer of 2021 because of the coronavirus pandemic sweeping the globe. It is the first postponement of an Olympics in peacetime.

CHINA EPICENTRE OPENS UP

Hubei, where the novel coronavirus emerged late last year, will allow healthy residents to leave the province from midnight. Officials say rules will be relaxed in the hardest-hit city of Wuhan on April 8.

RAY OF HOPE IN ITALY

Italy sees the second successive daily drop in deaths and infections but warns against premature hope of victory against the virus and calls on the population to continue to respect the confinement measures. The Mediterranean country yesterday reported 743 deaths, breaking two-day downward trend. But the medics there reported fewer cases and hoped the epidemic there might be slowing at last. The next few days data will establish the trend, they hoped.

INDIA IN 21-DAY LOCKDOWN

India's 1.3 billion people went under "total lockdown" from yesterday midnight (1830 GMT) for 21 days to combat the spread of the coronavirus pandemic, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said. In a national television address to the world's second-most-populous nation Modi said the step is "to save India, to save its every citizen, you, your family... every street, every neighbourhood."

SOURCE: AFP

UK wakes up to lockdown

Ban on public gatherings, travel curbs to continue for three weeks

REUTERS, London

Britain awoke to a virtual lockdown yesterday after Prime Minister Boris Johnson ordered people to stay at home, shops to close and an end to all social gatherings to halt the spread of coronavirus.

The unprecedented peacetime restrictions, which will last for at least three weeks, were brought in to prevent the state-run National Health Service (NHS) from being overwhelmed as the number of deaths in Britain rose to 335. However, social media images showed London Underground trains were still packed with commuters and one large retail chain suggested it wanted to stay open.

There were complaints that the advice was confusing or did not go far enough.

"It is absolutely critical for making sure our NHS is in the strongest position possible to restrict the spread," Cabinet Office minister Michael Gove told BBC TV.

"That means restricting social contact and following the advice the

government has put forward. People must stay at home to protect themselves, to protect the NHS and to save lives."

The curbs on movement, under which people should only leave their homes for very limited reasons such as going to supermarkets or once a day for exercise, were announced in a

flocking to parks and beauty spots.

All but essential shops must close immediately and people should no longer meet family or friends. Police will break up gatherings of more than two people and social events such as weddings, although not funerals, will be stopped.

Gove said stronger measures than 30-pound (\$35) fines for people who flouted the new restrictions could be introduced.

"The police have a range of enforcement tools, and of course fixed-penalty notices and fines are just one of them. If people do persist in behaving in an antisocial way, there are stronger measures that we have," he told ITV's Good Morning Britain.

Police said they were working with government to see how the rules could be effectively enforced.

Not everyone though was abiding by the tough measures. Sports Direct, a sports clothing chain owned by Frasers Group, initially indicated it would defy the order to close but later said it had asked the government for permission to open stores.

The number of deaths in Britain rises to 335

Police will break up gatherings of more than two people

Fines for people who flout the new restrictions could be introduced

national address by Johnson late on Monday.

He had resisted bringing in lockdowns which other European countries have introduced, but earlier advice for Britons to avoid gatherings was being widely ignored with people

Loss of smell could reveal hidden cases

Say experts from UK, US, France

AFP, Paris

From a mother unable to smell her baby's nappy to a lawmaker who suddenly could not taste food, some coronavirus patients have described a loss of olfactory senses -- and experts say this might be a new way to detect the virus.

Ear, nose and throat (ENT) specialists in Britain, the United States and France have noted a growing number of patients in recent weeks with anosmia -- the abrupt loss of smell -- and have said this could be a sign of Covid-19 in people who otherwise appear well.

Official figures suggest the coronavirus has infected some 380,000 people as the pandemic proliferates around the world, but with many cases going undetected experts have become concerned about the potential for people without symptoms to spread the virus.

The World Health Organisation lists the most common signs of Covid-19 as fever, tiredness and dry cough.

In Britain, ENT doctors have urged health authorities to advise people with a sudden loss of smell or taste to self-isolate even if they have no other symptoms.

"Anything we can do to delay transmission is absolutely vital," Claire Hopkins, the president of the British Rhinological Society, told AFP.

Hopkins, who published an open letter on the issue on Friday with ENT UK chief Nirmal Kumar, said she was not surprised when she heard initial reports from Iran and France of Covid-19 patients reporting a loss of smell.

UN urges easing of sanctions on Iran, others facing virus

The UN rights chief yesterday called for any sanctions imposed on countries like Iran facing the new coronavirus pandemic to be "urgently re-evaluated" to avoid pushing strained medical systems into collapse. "At this crucial time, both for global public health reasons, and to support the rights and lives of millions of people in these countries, sectoral sanctions should be eased or suspended," Michelle Bachelet said in a statement. Bachelet pointed in particular to the case of Iran -- one of the hardest-hit countries in the pandemic with nearly 2,000 deaths. The statement also cautioned that sanctions could impede medical efforts in Cuba, North Korea, Venezuela and Zimbabwe during the pandemic.

Pak civil servants suspended for corona patient selfie

Pakistan has suspended six civil servants after they posed for a selfie with a coronavirus patient in a quarantine centre, an official said yesterday. The selfie -- widely shared on social media -- pictured a group of men around the apparent patient, several of them smiling broadly and none wearing face masks. The picture was taken at a quarantine facility near Sukkur in virus-hit Sindh province, where 399 of the country's 892 COVID-19 cases have been recorded so far. "Six of the government employees have been suspended and put into quarantine," Rana Adeel, deputy commissioner in Sukkur, told AFP.

One lakh cameras are watching in Moscow



A vast and contentious network of facial recognition cameras keeping watch over Moscow is now playing a key role in the battle against the spread of the coronavirus in Russia. The city rolled out the technology just before the epidemic reached Russia, ignoring protests and legal complaints over sophisticated state surveillance. "We are constantly checking that this regulation is being observed, including through the use of automated facial recognition systems," Mayor Sergei Sobyanin wrote in his blog in February. Around 100,000 have now been linked to artificial intelligence systems that can identify people being filmed. Moscow police said last week that the cameras that are linked have allowed them to identify almost 200 people who broke quarantine rules.

SOURCE: AFP



'FRIEND OF CORONAVIRUS'

People hold their ears while doing sit-ups as a punishment for breaking a lockdown imposed to limit the spreading of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in Ahmedabad, India, yesterday. In at least three other districts in Uttar Pradesh state law enforcers made people who violate the lockdown to do sit-ups and squats, according to Reuters. Police in Meerut are also making citizens who break its lockdown hold up signs reading, "I am a friend of coronavirus," or "I am the enemy of society," before posting their pictures on Twitter.

PHOTO: REUTERS

US reduces Afghan aid over impasse

AFP, Kabul

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and his rival Abdullah Abdullah showed no sign of ending their bitter feud yesterday, even after it cost the impoverished nation \$1 billion in US aid -- with yet more on the line.

The massive cut was announced Monday after an exasperated US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Kabul in a bid to resolve the standoff that has seen Abdullah proclaim himself president despite Ghani officially winning last year's controversial poll.

Pompeo, who lashed out at the their "failure" to come to an agreement, said the US would immediately cut \$1 billion and was "prepared" to pull another \$1 billion in 2021, with further cuts possible after that.

The US and the Taliban signed a landmark deal last month that was supposed to pave the way for talks between the Afghan leadership and the insurgents, but with Kabul unable to agree who is in government, the talks have stalled.

With a GDP of only about \$20 billion, the cuts represent a devastating blow to Afghanistan's donor-dependent economy and could hardly come at a worse time -- with coronavirus spreading across the country and Taliban attacks on the increase.

Ghani appeared in a televised address yesterday to reassure Afghans that "the US reduction in aid will have no direct impact on our key sectors", adding that his government would try to satisfy the US "through talks and negotiations".

But he also blamed Abdullah, who he said has demanded changes to the constitution, which Ghani does not have the power to make.

US can be the new virus epicenter: WHO

AFP, Geneva

The COVID-19 outbreak in the United States has the potential to exceed that in Europe, the World Health Organization (WHO) said yesterday as the number of reported US cases surges.

The pandemic began in China in December but the epicentre has since shifted from Asia to Europe.

WHO spokeswoman Margaret Harris told reporters during a virtual press conference that 85 percent of the new cases reported to the global body overnight had come from Europe and the United States, now the two "main drivers of the outbreak".

The latest WHO coronavirus daily situation report -- published late Monday, before the overnight figures -- showed that Europe reported 20,131 new cases in the preceding 24 hours, while the United States reported 16,354, more than doubling its total caseload.

Asked whether the United States could overtake Europe as the epicentre of COVID-19, Harris said: "We are now seeing a very large acceleration in the number of cases from the US, so it does have that potential."

"We cannot say that that is the case yet but it does have that potential."

"They have a very large outbreak and an outbreak increasing in intensity." The WHO's Monday daily update showed European countries with 171,424 total infections and 8,743 deaths (up 1,318), while the United States reported a total of 31,573 infections and 402 fatalities (up 201).

Harris said that due to the incubation period, the rise in case numbers reflected a surge in transmissions taking place up to five days prior.

"Each individual infecting two to three other people takes about three to five days, so we're seeing what happened three or four days ago, or five days ago in many countries," Harris explained.

Elite hackers target WHO as virus cyberattacks spike

REUTERS, Washington/London

Elite hackers tried to break into the World Health Organization earlier this month, sources told Reuters, part of what a senior agency official said was a more than two-fold increase in cyberattacks.

WHO Chief Information Security Officer Flavio Aggio said the identity of the hackers was unclear, but the effort was unsuccessful. He warned that hacking attempts against the agency and its partners have soared as they battle to contain the coronavirus, which has killed more than 15,000 worldwide.

The attempted break-in at the WHO was first flagged to Reuters by Alexander Urbelis, a cybersecurity expert and attorney with the New York-based Blackstone Law Group, which tracks suspicious internet domain registration activity.

Urbelis said he picked up on the activity around March 13, when a group of hackers he'd been following activated a malicious site mimicking the WHO's internal email system.

"I realized quite quickly that this

was a live attack on the World Health Organization in the midst of a pandemic," he said.

Urbelis said he didn't know who was responsible, but two other sources briefed on the matter said they suspected an advanced group of hackers known as DarkHotel, which has been conducting cyber-espionage operations since at least 2007.

Messages sent to email addresses maintained by the hackers went unreturned.

When asked by Reuters about the incident, the WHO's Aggio confirmed that the site spotted by Urbelis had been used in an attempt to steal passwords from multiple agency staffers.

"There has been a big increase in targeting of the WHO and other cybersecurity incidents," Aggio said in a telephone interview. "There are no hard numbers, but such compromise attempts against us and the use of (WHO) impersonations to target others have more than doubled."

The motives in the case identified by Reuters aren't clear.