

Hospitals in London face 'tsunami' of patients

AFP, London

Hospitals in the British capital are being overwhelmed by Covid-19 patients, the head of an organisation representing bosses in the state-run National Health Service said yesterday.

The chief executive of NHS Providers, Chris Hopson, told BBC radio that London hospitals had seen an "explosion of demand... in seriously ill patients", likening it to a "continuous tsunami", with numbers predicted to surge in the next fortnight.

"They talk about wave, after wave after wave," he said. "The word that's often used to me is a sort of continuous tsunami."

According to the latest figures, 463 people have died from the virus and more than 9,500 people have been infected. London makes up a third of the UK total.

The government is opening a temporary 4,000-bed hospital at an exhibition centre in London next week to treat patients with the virus.

British media reported 10 similar facilities could be set up around the country.

Hopson said the problem of dealing with the increased number of patients was exacerbated by the "unprecedented absence rate" of medical staff.

"We're now seeing 30, 40 and even some places 50 percent sickness rates," he said, adding that there was also a "real problem" with ventilator capacity in hospitals.

His comments came as the government announced it had ordered 10,000 emergency ventilators to help tackle the pandemic from billionaire entrepreneur James Dyson.

In an email to staff, the inventor said his company designed the "CoVent" at the request of Prime Minister Boris Johnson, and promised to donate 5,000 to the international relief effort.

'No one will go hungry'

India outlines \$23b economic stimulus to help poor as cases tick up despite immense lockdown

AGENCIES

India yesterday announced a 1.7-trillion-rupee (\$22.6-billion) economic stimulus plan providing direct cash transfers and food security measures to give relief to millions of poor people hit by a nationwide lockdown over a coronavirus pandemic.

People queued in some cities for essential items, with trucks stranded at state borders and public transport suspended two days after Prime Minister Narendra Modi ordered the 21-day lockdown to protect a population of 1.3 billion.

"The government is working for those who are directly affected like migrants, labours, women etc. We are now announcing a package for poor and those who need immediate help. No one will go hungry," Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman told a news briefing.

Police have enforced the lockdown strictly, even though Modi said essential services would be maintained. India has recorded 649 virus infections

Relief to poor includes free distribution of grains, cash handovers

Announces \$66,000 insurance for every frontline health workers

38 million people risks losing job



and 13 deaths.

The government aims to distribute 5 kilograms of staple foodgrains wheat or rice for each person free of cost, with a kilogram of pulses for every low-income family, helping to feed about 800 million poor people over the next three months.

It also aims to hand out free cooking gas cylinders to 83 million poor families, in addition to direct cash transfers to some 200 million women and the elderly, over a similar period.

Under the scheme, 30 million poor senior citizens, poor widows and poor disabled will get an ex-gratia of Rs 1,000. Some 20 crore women would get Rs 500

per month for next three months to help them run their households.

The finance minister also announced increase in the daily wage for rural workers to Rs 202 a day from Rs 182, a move which is aimed at benefitting five crore families.

The government outlined plans for medical insurance cover of 5 million rupees (\$66,000) for every frontline health worker, from doctors, nurses and paramedics to those involved in sanitary services.

India's public health network, notoriously starved of resources, suffers an acute shortage of staff, so that sick people may often receive only hurried medical checks.

Among other financial relief, the government plans to release funds for the Employees' Provident Fund in some small firms in a measure aimed at covering 48 million workers.

The economic stimulus plan comes as a report said that the coronavirus impact could hit hard the tourism sector in India and render 3.8 crore people jobless, reports our New Delhi correspondent.

The Federation of Associations in Indian Tourism And Hospitality (FAITH) also said there should be a support fund for twelve months to support basic salaries with "direct transfer" to the affected tourism employees.

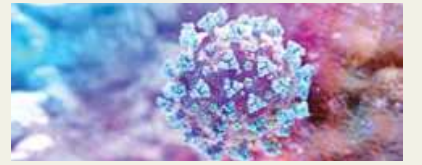
It is believed that around 70 per cent out of a total 5.5 crore workforce could get unemployed.



Customers stand on marked floor outside a grocery store to maintain recommended social distancing during a nationwide lockdown as a preventive measure against the Covid-19 coronavirus in Islamabad, Pakistan, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC



LATEST DEVELOPMENTS

DEATH TOLL CROSSES 21,000

At least 21,867 deaths have been recorded since the virus first emerged in December, according to an AFP tally compiled at 1200 GMT Thursday based on official sources. More than 481,230 declared cases have been registered in 182 countries and territories. The countries with the most deaths are Italy with 7,503 out of 74,386 declared infections, Spain with 4,088 deaths out of 56,188 cases, mainland China with 3,281 deaths out of 81,218 cases, Iran with 2,234 deaths out of 29,406 cases, and France with 1,331 fatalities out of 25,233 cases. Since 1900 GMT Wednesday, the West Bank and Croatia announced their first deaths.

WHO SEES 'ENCOURAGING SIGNS' IN EUROPE

At least 258,068 of those have been in Europe, the worst-hit continent. The World Health Organization's European office says it sees "encouraging signs" on the continent but cautions it is too soon to say whether the worst had passed.

LOOMING GLOBAL RECESSIONS

International ratings agency S&P Global warns the Covid-19 pandemic will push Britain and the euro area into recession this year, with their economies expected to shrink by as much as two percent. Austria's economy is predicted to shrink at least 2.5 percent in 2020. Singapore's economy shrinks 2.2 percent year-on-year in January-March, its biggest contraction since 2008 during the first quarter.

FRANCE CALLS ON ITS ARMY

The French military joins the virus fight as President Emmanuel Macron launches "Operation Resilience", focused on helping people and public services in France and its overseas territories.

CHINA CUTS INTERNATIONAL FLIGHTS

China is set to drastically cut its international flight routes in a bid to blunt the number of imported cases of the new coronavirus, the civil aviation authority said. Flights out of China will be capped at just one route a week to each country, with international airlines also permitted only one route. China has not reported any new domestic infections from the deadly virus for two consecutive days, but imported cases have now surpassed 500.

POPE FRANCIS TESTS NEGATIVE

Pope Francis was reported to have tested negative for the novel coronavirus after a person in his residence was said to have contracted Covid-19. Several Italian newspapers with reputable sources in the Vatican said the Italian clergyman who got sick had lived for years in the pope's Saint Martha's residence.

SOURCE: AFP



Great Barrier Reef suffers mass coral bleaching event

Australia's Great Barrier Reef has suffered "very widespread" damage after rising sea temperatures caused the third mass coral bleaching events in five years, authorities said yesterday. The planet's largest coral reef system is worth an estimated \$4 billion a year in tourism revenue for the Australian economy, but is at risk of losing its coveted world heritage status because warmer oceans brought about by climate change have damaged its health. Its northern reaches suffered an unprecedented two successive years of severe bleaching in 2016 and 2017, prompting the government agency overseeing the reef to downgrade its long-term outlook to "very poor".

Warring sides in Yemen back coronavirus truce

All sides in Yemen's long conflict yesterday offered support for the United Nations' call for a ceasefire to protect civilians from the coronavirus pandemic. The move came on the fifth anniversary of regional power Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen's civil war, at the helm of a military coalition supporting the internationally recognised government against the Iran-backed Huthi rebels. Yemen's broken healthcare system has not so far recorded a case of coronavirus but aid groups have warned that when it does hit, the impact will be catastrophic in a country already regarded as facing the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

Rockets hit Iraq's Green Zone

Two rockets slammed into the Iraqi capital's high-security Green Zone early yesterday, hours before US-led forces were set to pull out of a second base in the country. Some 7,500 troops are in Iraq as part of the US-led coalition helping local troops fight jihadist remnants, but those numbers are being significantly drawn down this month. The alliance is temporarily bringing some trainers home as a precautionary measure against the coronavirus pandemic and is also leaving other Iraqi bases altogether. Those bases and foreign embassies, particularly the American mission, have been targeted in more than two dozen rocket strikes since late October. The attacks, which the US has blamed on an Iran-backed armed group, have prompted fears of a proxy war on Iraqi soil. Before dawn yesterday, two rockets punched into an empty square near an Iraqi security headquarters in the Green Zone, where government buildings and foreign embassies are based, the Iraqi security forces said in a statement.

SOURCE: AFP

Coronavirus could become seasonal

Says top US scientist

AFP, Washington

There is a strong chance the new coronavirus could return in seasonal cycles, a senior US scientist said Wednesday, underscoring the urgent need to find a vaccine and effective treatments.

Anthony Fauci, who leads research into infectious diseases at the National Institutes of Health, told a briefing the virus was beginning to take root in the southern hemisphere, where winter is on its way.

"What we're starting to see now... in southern Africa and in the southern hemisphere countries, is that we're having cases that are appearing as they go into their winter season," he said.

"And if, in fact, they have a substantial outbreak, it will be inevitable that we need to be prepared that we'll get a cycle around the second time.

"It totally emphasizes the need to do what we're doing in developing a vaccine, testing it quickly and trying to get it ready so that we'll have a vaccine available for that next cycle."

There are currently two vaccines that have entered human trials -- one in the US and one in China -- and they could be a year to a year-and-a-half away from deployment.

Treatments are also being investigated -- some new drugs and others that have been repurposed, including the antimalarials chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine.

New Zealand mosque shooter changes plea to guilty

PM, Muslim community express relief at surprise decision

AFP, Wellington

An Australian far-right extremist charged with murdering 51 Muslim worshippers in last year's mass shooting at two New Zealand mosques unexpectedly flipped his plea to guilty yesterday.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and the Muslim community expressed relief at the surprise decision, which removes the need for a lengthy trial that authorities feared would be used to spout neo-Nazi propaganda.

Self-avowed white supremacist Brenton Tarrant, 29, had previously denied 51 charges of murder, 40 of attempted murder and one of terrorism but reversed his plea in a hurriedly arranged court hearing.

"Yes, guilty," Tarrant told Christchurch High Court via videolink from Auckland Prison as the charges were read out to him.

Tarrant, wearing a grey top, stared intently at the camera while making his confession.

Neither the former gym instructor from the

Australian country town of Grafton nor his lawyers offered any explanation for the change, which makes him New Zealand's first-ever convicted terrorist.

The South Pacific nation does not have the death penalty but Tarrant faces the prospect of spending the rest of his life behind bars.

The terror and murder charges all carry life sentences, setting a minimum non-parole period of 17 years but giving the judge power to imprison without the possibility of release.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said the admission of guilt would provide some relief to the many people whose lives were shattered in the attack.

"These guilty pleas and conviction bring accountability for what happened and also save the families who lost loved ones, those who were injured, and other witnesses, the ordeal of a trial," she said.

Asked how she reacted upon hearing the news, Ardern replied: "I let out a huge sigh of relief".



SLAUGHTERING OF TAMIL CIVILIANS

Sri Lanka pardons, releases soldier

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's president yesterday pardoned and released an army officer on death row for slitting the throats of Tamil civilians, including four children, during the island's bloody civil war.

Sunil Ratnayake was to be hanged for the December 2000 massacre in a case held up by previous Sri Lankan governments as an example of rare accountability over abuses committed during the conflict.

A court convicted him of murdering eight members of the Tamil minority, including a five-year-old and three teenagers. They were killed as they returned to their bombed homes to salvage what was left of their belongings, and their bodies were found buried in a mass grave near an army camp on the Jaffna peninsula.

The Supreme Court unanimously rejected the officer's appeal and upheld the death penalty last year.

But President Gotabaya Rajapaksa had now "instructed the Ministry of Justice to release Sgt Ratnayake from prison", a spokeswoman for his office said.

Rajapaksa, a retired army officer, came to power in November promising to free military personnel jailed for a string of offences during the previous administration.

He and his brother Mahinda, now serving as prime minister, are adored by the island's Sinhala majority for spearheading the defeat of separatist Tamil militants to end the country's 37-year ethnic war in 2009.



Sri Lanka's Special Task Force police commando officers distribute food to homeless people during a nationwide curfew, in Colombo, yesterday. The country is under a lockdown since March 20 as part of efforts to reduce the spread of the coronavirus which has infected at least 102 people in the island of 21 million people.

PHOTO: AFP

9 doctors die from virus in Philippines

AFP, Manila

Nine doctors have died in the Philippines from the coronavirus, the country's top medical association said yesterday, as hospitals were overwhelmed and medics complained about a lack of protection on the front lines. The announcement of the doctors' deaths heightened fears that the scale of the health crisis in the Philippines is much worse than is being officially reported, with the confirmed virus death toll at just 38.

Germany to carry out 5,000,000 tests

AFP, Berlin

Germany has boosted its coronavirus test rate to 500,000 a week, a virologist said yesterday, adding that early detection has been key in keeping the country's death rate relatively low. "The reason why Germany has so few deaths compared to the number of infected people can be explained by the fact that we carry out an extremely large number of laboratory diagnostic tests," said Christian Drosten, who heads the Institute of Virology at Berlin's Charité University Hospital.

Malawi vice president sues president

AFP, Blantyre

Malawian Vice President Saulos Chilima has filed a lawsuit against President Peter Mutharika after he refused to fire the electoral commissioners who oversaw last year's failed election, his lawyer said yesterday. A battle has been raging for months between the opposition and head of state over the May 21 vote, which was tainted by irregularities. Mutharika has refused to promulgate laws to hold the new ballot and to fire members of the Malawi Election Commission (MEC), which was requested by the constitutional court in its historic judgment.