

Worship that set a virus time bomb in France

REUTERS, Paris

From the stage of an evangelical superchurch, the leader of the gospel choir kicked off an evening of prayer and preaching: “We’re going to celebrate the Lord! Are you feeling the joy tonight?”

“Yes!” shouted the hundreds gathered at the Christian Open Door church on February 18. Some of them had travelled thousands of miles to take part in the week-long gathering in Mulhouse, a city of 100,000 on France’s borders with Germany and Switzerland.

For many members of this globe-spanning flock, the annual celebration is the highpoint of the church calendar. This time, someone in the congregation was carrying the coronavirus.

The prayer meeting kicked off the biggest cluster of Covid-19 in France - one of northern Europe’s hardest-hit countries - to date, local government said. Around 2,500 confirmed cases have been linked to it.

Worshippers at the church have unwittingly taken the disease caused by the virus home to the West African state of Burkina Faso, to the Mediterranean island of Corsica, to Guyana in Latin America, to Switzerland, to a French nuclear power plant, and into the workshops of one of Europe’s biggest automakers.

Weeks later, Germany partially closed its border with France, suspending a free-movement pact that has been in place for the past 25 years.

The church cluster was a key factor, two people familiar with the German decision told Reuters. Church officials told Reuters that 17 members of the congregation have since died of complications linked to the disease.

Other religious gatherings have been linked to the spread of the virus: A large church in South Korea has triggered more than 5,000 cases there.



Workers set up a field hospital in front of Mount Sinai West Hospital inside Central Park in New York City on Sunday. A senior US scientist issued a cautious prediction that the novel coronavirus could claim 100,000 to 200,000 lives in the United States. Inset, medical staff push a Covid-19 patient on a stretcher towards a French medical helicopter in Strasbourg yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

UK epidemic slowing

Top epidemiologist says antibody test could be ready in days

REUTERS, London

The coronavirus epidemic in the United Kingdom is showing signs of slowing and antibody tests could be ready in days, Neil Ferguson, a professor of mathematical biology at Imperial College London, said yesterday.

“We think the epidemic is just about slowing in the UK right now,” Ferguson told BBC radio. Britain, which has the world’s fifth largest economy, initially took an approach to containing the spread of the disease that was modest in comparison to European countries such as Italy.

But Prime Minister Boris Johnson imposed stringent controls after projections showed a quarter of a million people could die. Johnson on Friday became the first leader of a major power to announce a positive test result for coronavirus. He is self-isolating in Downing Street. Ferguson said a third or even 40% of people do not get any symptoms.

He said perhaps 2% to 3% of the United Kingdom’s population had been infected. But Ferguson cautioned that the data was not good enough to make firm extrapolations. He said

antibody tests were in the final stage of validation right now and could be hopefully ready to use in “days rather than weeks”.

Health officials said on Sunday that figures showed that 1,228 patients in the UK who tested positive for coronavirus (Covid-19) had died. As of 0800 GMT on March 29, a total of 127,737 people in the UK have been tested, of which 108,215 were confirmed negative and 19,522 were confirmed positive.

When asked whether the antibody test would be ready in days, junior health minister Helen Whately told BBC radio: “I am not going to confirm when that’s going to arrive.” Britain has begun rolling out antigen tests - which are different to

antibody tests - for healthcare workers but the numbers being tested are far below the levels of Germany, Europe’s largest economy. Whately said there was capacity to have 10,000 people a day tested though 7,000 were tested on Saturday or Sunday. She said the government hoped to get to 25,000 tests per day over the next few weeks.

A total of 1,27,737 people in UK have been tested

Govt hopes to get to 25,000 tests per day over the next few weeks

No community spread of virus

Says India’s health ministry as 92 new cases surfaced in 24-hrs

AGENCIES

India is still in the local transmission stage of the coronavirus pandemic, the government said yesterday, responding to questions about a health ministry document that said the country was currently in “local transmission and limited community transmission phase.”

“Nowhere are we calling it community transmission. We are still in the local transmission stage. If we use the word ‘community’ then there is speculation,” said Luv Agarwal of the Indian Council of Medical Research.

India has close to 1,100 coronavirus cases, including 29 deaths. Ninety-two new cases and four deaths due to Covid-19 have been reported in the last 24 hours, the health ministry said yesterday.

The ministry also released a document detailing SOPs for transporting a suspected case of coronavirus, reports NDTV. “This SOP is applicable to the current phase of Covid-19 pandemic in India (local transmission and limited community transmission),” the document said.

Of the four stages, Stage 1 is when cases are imported from affected countries. Only those who travelled abroad test positive. The government says India is still on Stage 2, when there is local transmission from infected persons.

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

LATEST UPDATES

US REGULATOR APPROVES LIMITED USE OF MALARIA DRUGS

A limited emergency-use authorisation for two antimalarial drugs touted as game-changers by President Donald Trump has been issued by the US Food and Drug Administration to treat coronavirus patients. In a statement published Sunday, the US Department of Health and Human Services detailed recent donations of medicine to a national stockpile -- including chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine, both being investigated as potential Covid-19 treatments.

AUSTRALIA UNVEILS ‘JOB KEEPER’ PAYMENTS

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison yesterday committed a A\$130 billion (\$79.86 billion) package to help save jobs as shockwaves from the coronavirus pandemic rip through the economy. The package includes a A\$1,500 (\$923.10) “job keeper” payment to be paid to employers every two weeks, for each worker under the scheme. “Our goal is to protect the lives and livelihoods,” Morrison said in a televised briefing from Canberra.

VAN GOGH PAINTING STOLEN FROM DUTCH MUSEUM

Thieves stole a painting by Vincent van Gogh after breaking into a Dutch museum closed to the public because of the coronavirus pandemic, the museum’s director said yesterday. “There has been a break-in last night and a painting by Van Gogh was stolen,” said Evert van Os of the Singer Laren Museum, in Laren, about 30 kilometres southeast of Amsterdam.

LIBYA FREES OVER 450 INMATES

Libya’s justice ministry announced Sunday over 450 prisoners were being freed in a bid to protect against the spread of coronavirus in the wake of the war-torn country’s first declared infections. Judicial officials decided to “free 466 detainees from correctional facilities” in Tripoli, according to a statement by the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord’s justice ministry. The detainees were in pretrial detention or had qualified for conditional release, the statement added.

CRUISE COMPANY SEARCHING FOR PORT FOR VIRUS SHIP

Passengers on a virus-stricken cruise liner entered the Panama Canal in Central America Sunday after they were told the company was still searching for a port which will allow them to disembark, even as they pleaded for help. The Panama Canal Authority said the Zaanadam liner had entered the canal, which connects the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, on Sunday afternoon after transferring healthy passengers to another ship and restocking supplies.

BELGIAN VIRUS DEATH TOLL PASSES 500

Belgium’s death toll from the novel coronavirus passed the 500 mark yesterday, with almost 12,000 cases detected since the start of the epidemic. Health authorities in the country of 11.4 million said 513 Covid-19 deaths had been recorded and 11,899 cases confirmed by laboratory tests. But officials said the rise in admissions to hospital slowed slightly over the previous 24 hours.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS



N Korea tests ‘super-large’ rocket launchers

Nuclear-armed North Korea successfully tested “super-large multiple rocket launchers”, state media said yesterday, but leader Kim Jong Un was not described as commanding the drill as analysts say Pyongyang seeks to normalise its launchers. With the world focused on the coronavirus pandemic and North Korea insisting it has not had a single Covid-19 case, the isolated state has carried out four such firings this month. Unusually, the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) did not say in its report that Kim had directed Sunday’s test. The leader is almost always shown overseeing the North’s launches but on this occasion KCNA said it was led by ruling party vice chairman Ri Pyong Chol and conducted by the Academy of National Defence Science.

Taliban kill dozens of Afghan troops in attacks

The Taliban have killed about two dozen Afghan police and pro-government fighters, officials said yesterday, in two attacks that came as the foes are supposed to be preparing for peace talks. In one of the incidents late Sunday, the insurgents killed at least six soldiers and 13 police and pro-government militiamen at several outposts near a police headquarters building in northeastern Takhar province, provincial police spokesman Khalil Assir told AFP. A wedding party was being held in the building at the time, but the attackers did not reach the headquarters. “The police bravely defended and prevented the Taliban from entering the celebration,” Assir said.

US won’t pay Harry and Meghan security: Trump

President Donald Trump said Sunday that the United States would not pay security costs for Prince Harry and his wife Meghan, appearing to confirm that the royal couple have moved to live in California. They reportedly flew by private jet from Canada to Los Angeles before the border between the two countries closed because of the deadly coronavirus outbreak. The couple, who had been living in Canada for several months, rocked the royal family earlier this year with their decision to no longer represent the British monarchy and to pursue a new, independent life. “I am a great friend and admirer of the Queen & the United Kingdom,” Trump tweeted.

SOURCE: AFP

Germany ramps up virus testing

Uses smartphone location data to trace patient’s movements

AFP, Berlin

In the race against the coronavirus, Germany is betting on widespread testing and quarantining to break the infection chain, a strategy borrowed from South Korea whose success in slowing the outbreak has become the envy of the world.

Germany is already carrying out more coronavirus tests than any other European country at a rate of 300,000 to 500,000 a week, according to officials.

But Chancellor Angela Merkel’s government aims to ramp that up to at least 200,000 tests a day, according to an interior ministry document seen by several German media outlets.

The goal would be to test all those who suspect they have caught the virus, as well as the entire circle of people who have come into contact with a confirmed case.

Current testing criteria are focussed on those who are sick with Covid-19 symptoms and have had contact with a confirmed case.

The idea, according to the document, is to move from tests “that confirm the situation” to tests that “get ahead of it”.

A crucial weapon in the battle would be the use of smartphone location data to trace a patient’s recent movements, to more accurately track down and isolate potentially infected people.



Homeless people eat food sitting in lines outside a shelter during a government-imposed nationwide lockdown as a preventive measure against the Covid-19 novel coronavirus in New Delhi, India yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

‘It is my first time’

NY food banks flooded with newcomers deprived of income

AFP, New York

New York food banks have become inundated with newcomers deprived of income since the near-total halt of business in the United States’ economic capital.

Sacks of oranges, sweet potatoes and onions are spread over three tables at an open-air market in Washington Heights, a neighborhood in the north of Manhattan. Sterilized milk and cans of tuna and salmon cover three others.

Hundreds of people came over the weekend to restock at the distribution center, one of many run by City Harvest, a major New York-based charity.

There are no long lines reminiscent of the soup kitchens of the 1930s. Instead, people trickle in, often wearing masks for protection and keeping their distance from each other under the direction of market volunteers.

Among the customers is Lina Alba, 40, a single mother with five children aged between 11 and 23. She worked as a maid in a Manhattan hotel until it

closed two weeks ago.

Her two oldest children also lost their jobs.

“It is my first time,” she said. “We need the help now. This is crazy. So we don’t know what’s gonna happen in a few weeks.”

She’s trying to stay positive, though. “At least I’m spending time with my kids... I am the teacher, I am the mom -- I am everything.”

“We are alive, we are healthy, we just need to pray.” It took the single mother a week to register for unemployment -- the service flooded, pointing to much worse unemployment numbers than those announced by the federal government on Thursday. But on Friday, “I did it, finally,”

Alba said, relieved.

The benefits should start arriving in three weeks. Alba also hopes to receive soon at least \$1,200 from the federal government. “It’s not gonna be enough,” but “you’re gonna appreciate anything right now,” she said, noting that “a lot of people” need help. “It is the whole entire city.”



Nature takes back world’s empty city streets

AFP, Paris

As humans retreat into their homes as more and more countries go under coronavirus lockdown, wild animals are slipping cover to explore the empty streets of some of our biggest cities.

Wild boars have descended from the hills around Barcelona while sika deer are nosing their way around the deserted metro stations of Nara, Japan.

Indian social media has gone wild about footage of a stag scampering through Dehradun, the capital of the northern state of Uttarakhand.

Gangs of wild turkeys have been strutting the streets of Oakland, California, while a puma turned up in the centre of the Chilean capital Santiago, which is under curfew.

“This is the habitat they once had and that we’ve taken away from them,” said Marcelo Giagnoni, the head of Chile’s agricultural and livestock service that helped police capture the curious big cat.

While sightings of dolphins in Venice’s canals turned out to be fanciful, they have

been popping up in ports elsewhere in the Mediterranean as emboldened wildlife takes “free rein to wander our cities and towns”, said Romain Julliard, head of research at the French Natural History Museum.

He told AFP that foxes were at the vanguard of the new urban explorers. “They change their behaviour very quickly. When a place becomes quiet, they’re straight in there.”

Animals and birds that normally live in urban parks, like sparrows and pigeons are also more likely to venture beyond their usual territories, Julliard said, “freeing a space for other animals”.

While the dawn and dusk choruses have been bringing comfort to many quarantined city dwellers, the museum’s acoustics specialist Jerome Sueur said that doesn’t mean there are more urban birds than before.

It is more that with reduced traffic noise we can hear them better. Some, however, “stop singing when there is noise, so now they are letting themselves go.”