



## Stop wearing masks if you're not sick: WHO

CNN ONLINE

World Health Organization officials Monday said they still recommend people not wear face masks unless they are sick with Covid-19 or caring for someone who is sick.

"There is no specific evidence to suggest that the wearing of masks by the mass population has any potential benefit. In fact, there's some evidence to suggest the opposite in the misuse of wearing a mask properly or fitting it properly," Dr. Mike Ryan, executive director of the WHO health emergencies program, said at a media briefing in Geneva, Switzerland, on Monday.

"There also is the issue that we have a massive global shortage," Ryan said about masks and other medical supplies. "Right now the people most at risk from this virus are frontline health workers who are exposed to the virus every second of every day. The thought of them not having masks is horrific."

World Health Organization officials warned at a media briefing last week that globally there is a "significant shortage" of medical supplies, including personal protective gear or PPE, for doctors.

"We need to be clear," Dr. Maria Van Kerkhove, an infectious disease epidemiologist with the WHO, said last week.

"The world is facing a significant shortage of PPE for our frontline workers -- including masks and gloves and gowns and face shields -- and protecting our health care workers must be the top priority for use of this PPE."

## 'We're living on a prayer'

Indian doctors fight coronavirus with raincoats, helmets

REUTERS, New Delhi

Shortages of protective health gear in India are forcing some doctors to use raincoats and motorbike helmets while fighting the coronavirus, exposing the weak state of the public health system ahead of an anticipated surge in COVID-19 cases.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government said India was trying to get personal protective equipment in bulk domestically and from South Korea and China to meet the shortages.

More than a dozen doctors battling the outbreak, which has so far infected 1,251 people and killed 32, told Reuters they were concerned that without this proper gear, they could become carriers of the disease.

In Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, drivers of around 4,700 ambulances that mainly serve government hospitals went on strike yesterday, demanding proper safety gear and health insurance.

According to one projection, more than 100,000 people could be infected by mid-May, putting India's underfunded health system and scarce doctors under severe strain.

In the eastern city of Kolkata, junior doctors at the major coronavirus treatment facility - Beliaghata Infectious Disease Hospital - were given

plastic raincoats to examine patients last week, according to two doctors there and photographs reviewed by Reuters.

In northern Haryana state near New Delhi, Dr Sandeep Garg of ESI Hospital said he had been using a motorbike helmet because he didn't have any N95 masks, which offer significant protection against virus particles.

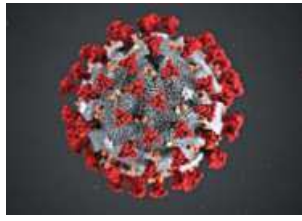
The plight of doctors in the pandemic has cast a light on a dilapidated and overburdened public health system that has for years been starved of funds and an overhaul. India spends about 1.3% of its GDP on public health, among the lowest in the world.

"We are living on a prayer, it's not that we can save ourselves by relying on the health system," said a senior federal government official in New Delhi.

In a state-run hospital in the city of Rohtak in Haryana, several junior doctors have been declining to treat patients unless they have adequate safety equipment.

They also established an informal COVID-19 fund, to which each doctor contributed 1,000 rupees (\$13.27) to buy masks and other face coverings, one of the doctors said.

"Everybody is scared," the doctor said. "Nobody wants to work without protection."



## 'Tsunami is coming'

New York governor begs for help

AGENCIES

New York's governor put out an urgent plea for medical volunteers, and a Navy hospital ship pulled into port as coronavirus deaths in the city mounted and hospitals buckled in what authorities say could be a preview of what other communities across the United States could soon face.

"Please come help us in New York now. We need relief," Governor Andrew Cuomo pleaded as the number of dead in New York State climbed past 1,200, with most of those victims dying in New York City.

A US Navy hospital ship with 1,000 beds arrived in port in New York on Monday to help relieve the crisis gripping the city. The USNS Comfort - also sent to New York City after 9/11 - will be used to treat non-coronavirus patients while packed hospitals deal with those with COVID-19.

Nurses and other medical professionals who volunteered to help have also begun arriving.

As he announced the latest death toll, he said, "That's a lot of loss, that's a lot of pain, that's a lot of tears, that's a lot of grief that people all across this state are feeling."

Criticising President Donald Trump's politicising of the crisis, Cuomo told MSNBC earlier on Monday: "The science people, the government professionals, have to stand up and look the president in the eye and say this is not a political exercise. This is not press relations. It's not optics. The tsunami is coming."

The United States has the highest number of infected people with 164,610 diagnosed cases, 3,170 deaths and 5,764 recoveries.



The USNS Comfort passes the Statue of Liberty as it enters New York Harbor during the outbreak of the coronavirus disease in New York, on Monday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

### LATEST UPDATES

#### MORE THAN 790,000 CASES

More than 790,640 cases of infection have been recorded in 185 countries and territories since the epidemic started in China in December, according to an AFP tally compiled at 1000 GMT Tuesday based on official sources. At least 38,464 deaths have been recorded, 27,740 of those in Europe. Italy has 11,591 deaths, Spain 8,189, mainland China 3,305, the United States 3,170, France 3,024, and Iran 2,898.

#### 11M ASIANS FACE POVERTY

The World Bank warns China's growth in 2020 could be brought to a standstill, compared to 6.1 percent growth in 2019, which was already its worst performance since 1990. The country will postpone its notoriously difficult college entrance tests from June to July. The economic fallout from the coronavirus pandemic could drive an additional 11 million people into poverty in East Asia and the Pacific unless "urgent action" is taken, the World Bank warned in a report released Monday.

#### RAY OF HOPE AMID RECORD DEATH TOLLS

Once again, Spain hit a new record with 849 coronavirus deaths in 24 hours although health chiefs said the rate of new infections was continuing its downward trend. The number of confirmed cases rose to 94,417 yesterday after another 9,222 people tested positive: a nearly 11-percent increase. This time last week, the rate of new infections stood at around 20 percent. Professionals of Italy also said the trend is slowing there despite the record death toll.

#### IRAN, EUROPE TO GET MEDICAL EQUIPMENT

European nations deliver medical goods to Iran in the first transaction under the Instex mechanism set up in January 2019 to bypass United States sanctions on Tehran. President Donald Trump says the US will send some shipments of excess medical equipment worth around \$100 million to hard-hit Italy, and later to France and Spain.

#### MORE THAN 3.6 BILLION IN LOCKDOWN

Panama announces strict quarantine measures that separate citizens by gender. From Wednesday for 15 days, men and women will only be able to leave their homes for two hours at a time, and on different days. On Sunday all outings are banned. Mexico extends its state of emergency to April 30, which also allows it to prolong its suspension of all non-essential activities. Guinea announces a night-time curfew between 2100-0500 GMT and restrictions on movement out of the capital. More than 3.6 billion people -- 46.5 percent of the world population -- are now either under orders or have been asked to stay home, according to an AFP database tally on Tuesday.

#### SPAIN BANS FUNERAL CEREMONIALS

Spain banned funeral ceremonies, including vigils at home, and decreed that no more than three people could attend burials as the government struggles with thousands of fatalities from the coronavirus pandemic. Madrid announced that "religious celebrations and civilian funeral ceremonies are postponed until the end of the alert," which has been declared until at least April 11 and keeps the population confined.

SOURCE: AFP



## Harry, Meghan quit royal life

Prince Harry and his wife Meghan formally step down as senior members of the British royal family yesterday, as they start a controversial new life in the United States. The couple have already relocated to California, according to reports, after announcing in January that they intended to quit royal life and "work to become financially independent". The decision means they will no longer carry out duties on behalf of Queen Elizabeth II and are giving up their office within the monarchy in Britain. However, they will continue to be known as the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, their official titles, and Harry remains sixth in line to the throne, with no change in the line of succession.

## Myanmar journalist hit with terrorism charges

A Myanmar journalist faces up to life in prison for publishing an interview with a rebel group operating in the country's restive Rakhine state a week after the insurgents were classified as a terrorist organisation. The western region has long been a tinderbox of conflict between the Myanmar military and Arakan Army (AA), a group demanding greater autonomy for the state's ethnic Rakhine people. A March 27 interview with a top-ranking AA representative published by the Mandalay-based Voice of Myanmar led to the detention of editor-in-chief Nay Myo Lin, who was brought to court on terrorism charges yesterday. The interview was published after the government declared on March 23 that the insurgents had been classified as a "terrorist group". Amnesty International's Nicholas Bequelin called for the charges to be dropped and for Nay Myo Lin's immediate release.

## US deploys Patriot air defence system to Iraq

The United States has deployed Patriot air defence batteries to Iraqi bases to protect American troops recently targeted by Iranian missiles, US and Iraqi military sources told AFP Monday. Washington and Baghdad had been negotiating the placement of the defence system since January, when Tehran fired ballistic missiles at the western Iraqi base of Ain al-Asad, which hosts American and other foreign troops. One of the Patriot batteries was deployed to Ain al-Asad last week and was being assembled, said US sources. Another battery was deployed to a base in Arbil, the capital of Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan region. Two further batteries destined for Iraq were still in Kuwait.

SOURCE: AFP

## AI predicts which patients will get deadly 'wet lung'

AFP, Washington

Researchers in the US and China reported Monday they have developed an artificial intelligence tool that is able to accurately predict which newly infected patients with the novel coronavirus go on to develop severe lung disease.

Once deployed, the algorithm could assist doctors in making choices about where to prioritize care in resource-stretched health care systems, researchers said.

The tool discovered several surprising indicators that were most strongly predictive of who went on to develop so-called acute respiratory disease syndrome (ARDS), a severe complication of the COVID-19 illness that fills the lungs with fluid and kills around 50 percent of coronavirus patients who get it.

The team applied a machine learning algorithm to data from 53 coronavirus patients across two hospitals in Wenzhou, China, finding that changes in three features -- levels of the liver enzyme alanine aminotransferase (ALT), reported body aches, and hemoglobin levels -- were most accurately predictive of subsequent, severe disease.

Using this information along with other factors, the tool was able to predict risk of ARDS with up to 80 percent accuracy.

## World's last virus-free corners

AFP, Koror

A coronavirus-free tropical island nestled in the northern Pacific may seem the perfect place to ride out a pandemic -- but residents on Palau say life right now is far from idyllic.

The microstate of 18,000 people is among a dwindling number of places on Earth that still report zero cases of COVID-19 as figures mount daily elsewhere. The disparate group also includes Samoa, Turkmenistan, North Korea and bases on the frozen continent of Antarctica.

A dot in the ocean hundreds of kilometers from its nearest neighbours, Palau is surrounded by the vast Pacific, which has acted as a buffer against the virus. Along with strict travel restrictions, this seems to have kept infections at bay for a number of nations including Tonga, the Solomon Islands, the Marshall Islands and Micronesia.

But remoteness is not certain to stop the relentless march of the new disease. The Northern Mariana Islands confirmed its first cases over the weekend, followed by a suspected death on Monday.

Klamiokl Tulop, a 28-year-old artist and single mum, is hopeful Palau can avoid the fate of Wuhan, New York or Madrid -- where better-resourced health services were overrun.

But she describes a growing sense of dread, a fear that the virus is coming or could already be on the island undetected.

Inside Australia's four remote Antarctic research

bases, around 90 people have found themselves ensconced on the only virus-free continent as they watch their old home transform beyond recognition.

In some places, reporting no cases does not always mean there are no cases to report.

North Korea has portrayed emergency measures as an unqualified success in keeping COVID-19 out, despite sustained epidemics in neighbouring China and South Korea.

But state media also appears to have doctored images to give ordinary North Koreans face masks -- handing sceptics reason to believe the world's most secretive government may not be telling the whole truth.

While Palau has no confirmed cases, it has still been gripped by the society-altering fears and economic paralysis that have affected elsewhere.

Supermarket aisles in the country's largest town Koror have seen panic buying and there are shortages of hand sanitizers, masks and alcohol.

The islands depend heavily on goods being shipped or flown in, meaning supplies can quickly run low. United Airlines used to fly six times a week from nearby Guam -- which has seen more than 50 cases -- but now there is just one flight a week.

Residents have been practising social distancing. Doctors are waiting for test kits and the government is building five isolation rooms that will be able to hold up to 14 patients.

It all feels like waiting for the inevitable.

## Middle-age patients too at high risk

AFP, Paris

Middle-aged people, and not just the elderly, have a dramatically higher risk of dying or developing serious illness from COVID-19, new research from Britain showed yesterday.

The findings came in a new comprehensive analysis of virus cases in mainland China.

Researchers from Britain analysed more than 3,600 confirmed COVID-19 cases as well as data from hundreds of passengers repatriated from the outbreak city of Wuhan.

They found that age was a key determining factor in serious infections, with nearly one in five over-80s requiring hospitalisation, compared to around 1 percent among people under 30.

Taking into account estimates of the number of cases that may not have been clinically confirmed -- that is, mild or asymptomatic infections -- the data showed the hospitalisation rate of patients in their fifties was 8.2 percent.

The study, published in The Lancet Infectious Diseases journal, estimated that the mortality rate from confirmed COVID-19 cases in mainland China

was 1.38 percent.

If unconfirmed cases were taken into account, the death rate dropped to 0.66 percent.

The authors of the research said that while this was significantly lower than previous estimates, COVID-19 is still several times deadlier than previous pandemic viruses, such as H1N1.

"Our estimates can be applied to any country to inform decisions around the best containment policies for COVID-19," said Azra Ghani, a study co-author from Imperial College London.

"There might be outlying cases that

### HOSPITALIZATION IN CHINA

18.4 percent of patients in their 80s

4.3 percent patients between 40 to 49

Only 1 percent patients under 30



get a lot of media attention, but our analysis very clearly shows that at aged 50 and over, hospitalisation is much more likely than in those under 50, and a greater proportion of cases are likely to be fatal."

Billions of people have been confined to their homes around the world as governments desperately try to stop the spread of the novel coronavirus.

As of 1900 GMT Monday the virus had killed 38,466 people out of more than 791,000 cases globally.

That would mean 4.8 percent of all confirmed COVID-19 infections have

proven deadly.

But experts stress that without widespread testing it is impossible to know how many people may have become infected and recovered.

This means the true mortality rate is likely much lower, in line with The Lancet study and previous research from China.

The Lancet study showed that 18.4 percent of patients in their 80s were hospitalised in China.

This compared to 4.3 percent for 40 to 49-year-olds and roughly 1 percent for people in their 20s.

## 30 Albanian doctors help virus-hit Italy

AFP, Brescia

About 30 doctors from Albania, one of Europe's poorest countries, were at work in northern Italy on Monday helping overwhelmed hospitals at the epicentre of the coronavirus pandemic. One of the doctors said he was simply following the Hippocratic Oath that medics have taken through the ages vowing to help their colleagues in need. The doctors arrived Monday in Brescia, a city whose COVID-19 death and infection rates have been among the highest in the world for the past month.

## Saudi-led raids hit Yemen's Sanaa

AFP, Riyadh

The Saudi-led military coalition on Monday carried out multiple air strikes on Yemen's rebel-held capital Sanaa in retaliation for missile strikes on Riyadh. Residents in Sanaa reported multiple explosions after the bombing raids began, in a new escalation despite UN calls for a ceasefire to protect Yemeni civilians from the coronavirus pandemic. The operation comes after Saudi air defences intercepted Houthi ballistic missiles over Riyadh and the border city of Jizan late Saturday.

## At least 19 killed in China forest fire

AFP, Beijing

Eighteen firefighters and one forestry guide died while fighting a huge forest fire in southwestern China, the local government said yesterday. State television footage showed large flames shooting into the sky from the mountains above the city of Xichang in Sichuan province, turning the sky orange. More than 1,200 local people have been evacuated from the worst-hit areas.