

India bans Zoom for government use

India has banned the use of video-conferencing app Zoom for government remote meetings, the government said Thursday, in the latest warning about the platform's security. The app has become the global go-to service for everything from education to exercise classes as millions stay home because of lockdowns to combat Covid-19's spread. "This advisory states that the platform is not for use by government officers/officials for official purposes," the Home Affairs Ministry said in a statement Thursday, referring to the guidelines it had issued Sunday. "Zoom is not a safe platform," the statement said. The ministry also advised private users on how to avoid issues such as "Zoom bombing" -- when uninvited guests join the video call, often to harass users. India's cyber-security agency warned earlier this year of the app's security vulnerabilities.

'Cloud brightening' to protect Great Barrier Reef

An ambitious "cloud brightening" experiment has been carried out over Australia's Great Barrier Reef in an early-stage trial that scientists hope could become a futuristic way to protect coral from global warming. In an attempt to cool waters around the reef by making clouds reflect more sunlight, researchers said they used a boat-mounted fan similar to a snow cannon to shoot salt crystals into the air. Results from the trial were "really, really encouraging," the project's lead scientist Daniel Harrison from Southern Cross University said yesterday. "All the research is theoretical... so this is an absolute world first to go out and actually try and take seawater and turn it into these cloud condensation nuclei," he told AFP.

Soyuz crew returns to Earth



Two Nasa astronauts and a Russian cosmonaut made a safe return from the International Space Station to a planet roiled by the coronavirus pandemic yesterday. Andrew Morgan, Jessica Meir and Oleg Skripochka touched down in central Kazakhstan at 0516 GMT in the first returning mission since the World Health Organisation declared Covid-19 a global pandemic in March. "TOUCHDOWN! Welcome home, Oleg Skripochka, Andrew Morgan and Jessica Meir!" Russia's Roscosmos space agency said in a tweet yesterday. While the trio's landing site southeast of the Kazakh town of Dzhezkazgan is the same as for previous crews, the pandemic has forced a number of changes to mission-end protocol. Roscosmos said Tuesday that the crew's meeting the trio at the landing site were tested for Covid-19 and will don full-body protective wear.

SOURCE: AFP



A man reacts as he is released from Insein Prison in Yangon yesterday, as part of an annual amnesty to thousands of prisoners to mark its April New Year holiday. More than a quarter of Myanmar's prison population is being released, the president's office announced yesterday, after calls grew to ease pressure on overcrowded jails with coronavirus fears gripping the country.

PHOTO: AFP

EU facing 'moment of truth'

Says Macron, warns the bloc will splinter if unable to unify in its virus response

CNN ONLINE

Emmanuel Macron has said that the European Union faces a "moment of truth" as it reckons with the devastating financial fallout of the coronavirus pandemic, warning that "the populists will win" and the bloc will splinter if it is unable to unify in its response.

The French President said the EU's economic approach will determine whether it is "a political project or a market project only," in an interview with the Financial Times published yesterday. The EU's member states have been engaged in a standoff over how to tackle the financial hit of the Covid-19 outbreak.

"If we can't do this today, I tell you the populists will win," he added, predicting a wave of Euroskepticism in the countries hit hardest by the pandemic if the EU does not support them. "Today, tomorrow, the day after, in Italy, in Spain, perhaps in France and elsewhere."

"It's obvious because people will say, 'What is this great journey that [the EU] are offering? These people won't protect you in a crisis, nor in



its aftermath, they have no solidarity with you," he said.

"When immigrants arrive in your country, they tell you to keep them. When you have an epidemic, they tell you to deal with it. Oh, they're really nice," Macron added, paraphrasing populist arguments.

His threat echoed that of Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, who has previously warned that a failure to loosen the EU's purse strings would mean "the end of Europe."

The French leader said there was "no choice" but to set up a fund that "could issue common debt with a common guarantee" to finance member states according to their needs rather than the size of their economies. This is an idea that Germany and the Netherlands have so far rejected.

"There are notions of solidarity at stake," Macron said. "The economy depends on it."

Last week, member states agreed on a €500 billion (\$547 billion) package of funds to help countries struggling pay for public services, keep business afloat and help people who have lost their jobs as a result of the crisis.

But there was no concrete agreement on how an additional rescue fund would be generated. Italy has been arguing in favour of so-called "coronabonds," which would raise money against shared European debt by creating an attractive asset for investors and would come without strings, but that idea has had pushback from other major economies in the bloc.

IMF approves \$1.4b in aid to Pakistan

AFP, Washington

The IMF on Thursday approved nearly \$1.4 billion in emergency aid to Pakistan to help it weather the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

Pakistan has recorded just over 100 deaths but experts have voiced fear that the country of 215 million could see a rapid and devastating increase due to its shortage of medical infrastructure and crowded cities.

The IMF said it was providing the \$1.386 billion under a so-called rapid financing instrument, which addresses emergencies and does not subject a country to a full-fledged reform program that undergoes review.



An aerial view shows the P4 laboratory at the Wuhan Institute of Virology in Wuhan in China's central Hubei province, yesterday. The P4 epidemiological laboratory is among a handful of labs around the world cleared to handle Class 4 pathogens.

PHOTO: AFP

Japan offers \$930 to every resident

AFP, Tokyo

Japan will offer a cash payment of 100,000 yen (\$930) to every resident, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced yesterday, as measures to contain the coronavirus decimate the world's third-top economy.

"We are moving quickly to deliver cash to all people," Abe said in a televised news conference to explain his decision to expand a state of emergency nationwide.

An initial plan to provide three times that amount to households, which have seen incomes slashed because of the coronavirus, was ditched and Abe apologised for the confusion.

Japan has seen relatively few cases and deaths compared to hotspots in Europe and the United States but a recent spike in Tokyo -- which logged a daily record 201 new cases yesterday -- has sparked concern.

Abe initially declared a state of emergency in seven regions of the country but expanded this on Thursday to include the entire country.

The state of emergency hands regional governors the power to demand people stay indoors but stops far short of restrictions seen elsewhere as there is no punishment for transgression.

Abe said authorities would reassess the situation on May 6 at the end of the public holiday.



Myanmar carrying out air strikes in Rakhine state: UN

At least 32 people killed

REUTERS, Geneva

A surge in fighting between the Myanmar military and insurgents has killed at least 32 people, mostly women and children, in the restive Rakhine and Chin states, the UN human rights office said yesterday, adding the military had destroyed homes and schools.

The Arakan Army, an insurgent group seeking greater autonomy for the region, has been battling government troops for more than a year.

"Myanmar's military has been carrying out almost daily airstrikes and shelling in populated areas resulting in at least 32 deaths and 71 injuries since 23 March, the majority women and children, and they have also been destroying and burning schools and homes," UN human rights office spokesman Rupert Colville told a Geneva news briefing.

In response to a question, he said it was "very difficult to get precise information from Rakhine on whether the reported casualties are the result of targeting or were caught in the crossfire between the Arakan Army and Myanmar army".

Myanmar military spokesmen could not immediately be reached for comment on the report. The army has dismissed some of the accusations of civilian casualties as fabricated. Shelling in Rakhine state's Kyaukseik village on Monday killed eight people, two local officials and a resident told Reuters, but the army said reports that civilians in the village had been shelled were "fabricated".

Countries including the United States and Britain have called for an end to fighting in Rakhine, not least to help protect vulnerable communities from the coronavirus pandemic. Myanmar has reported 85 cases of COVID-19 and four deaths.

Hacking activity surges globally

REUTERS, San Francisco

Hacking activity against corporations in the United States and other countries more than doubled by some measures last month as digital thieves took advantage of security weakened by pandemic work-from-home policies, researchers said.

Corporate security teams have a harder time protecting data when it is dispersed on home computers with widely varying setups and on company machines connecting remotely, experts said. Even those remote workers using virtual private networks (VPNs), which establish secure tunnels for digital traffic, are adding to the problem, officials and researchers said.

Software and security company VMware Carbon Black said this week that ransomware attacks it monitored jumped 148% in March from the previous month, as governments worldwide curbed movement to slow the novel coronavirus, which has killed more than 130,000.

"There is a digitally historic event occurring in the background of this pandemic, and that is there is a cybercrime pandemic that is occurring," said VMware cybersecurity strategist Tom Kellerman.

"It's just easier, frankly, to hack a remote user than it is someone sitting inside their corporate environment. VPNs are not bullet-proof, they're not the be-all, end-all."

Using data from US-based Team Cymru, which has sensors with access to millions of networks, researchers at Finland's Arctic Security found that the number of networks experiencing malicious activity was more than double in March in the United States and many European countries compared with January, soon after the virus was first reported in China.

The biggest jump in volume came as computers responded to scans when they should not have. Such scans often look for vulnerable software that would enable deeper attacks.

ECONOMIC DOWNTURN CAUSED BY CORONAVIRUS

Hundreds of thousands of children could die: UN

REUTERS, United Nations

Hundreds of thousands of children could die this year due to the global economic downturn sparked by the coronavirus pandemic and tens of millions more could fall into extreme poverty as a result of the crisis, the United Nations warned on Thursday.

The world body also said in a risk report that nearly 369 million children across 143 countries who normally rely on school meals for a reliable source of daily nutrition have now been forced to look elsewhere.

"We must act now on each of these threats to our children," U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said. "Leaders must do everything in their power to cushion the impact of the pandemic. What started as a public health emergency has snowballed into a formidable test for the global promise to leave no one behind."

The new coronavirus, which caused the respiratory illness COVID-19, first emerged in the Chinese city of Wuhan late last year. So far it has infected more than 2 million people - killing some 138,000 - in 213 countries and territories, according to a Reuters tally.

Compared with adults, children infected with the coronavirus are less likely to have symptoms and more likely to have a mild illness, US and Chinese studies have found.

But the UN report warned that "economic hardship experienced by families as a result of the global economic downturn could result in an hundreds of thousands of additional child deaths in 2020, reversing the last 2 to 3 years of progress in reducing infant mortality within a single year."

With businesses shut down and more than a billion people told to stay home to avoid spreading the virus, the International Monetary Fund has predicted the world would this year suffer its steepest downturn since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The United Nations said 42 million to 66 million children could fall into extreme poverty as a result of the coronavirus crisis this year, adding to the estimated 386 million children already in extreme poverty in 2019.

The UN report on children also said 188 countries have imposed countrywide school closures, affecting more than 1.5 billion children.

"The potential losses that may accrue in learning for today's young generation, and for the development of their human capital, are hard to fathom," it said. "More than two-thirds of countries have introduced a national distance learning platform, but among low-income countries the share is only 30 percent."



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