

Row escalates over origin of virus

Trump vows to find out truth; WHO defends China's revised COVID-19 figures

AGENCIES

Tensions between world's top superpowers escalated yesterday as US President Donald Trump said that "a lot of strange things are happening" regarding the origins of the novel coronavirus and China strongly denied any anomalies on their part.

Chinese scientists have said the virus likely jumped from an animal to humans in a market that sold wildlife in Wuhan, but the existence of a high-security biosafety P4 laboratory there has fuelled conspiracy theories that the germ spread from the facility.

The United States has now brought the allegations into the mainstream, with Trump saying that his government is seeking to determine whether the virus emanated from the laboratory in China.

"A lot of strange things are happening but there is a lot of investigation going on. And



that the virus may have come -- accidentally -- from the facility.

US diplomatic cables seen by The Washington Post revealed that officials were especially concerned about inadequate safety standards related to researchers' handling of SARS-like bat coronaviruses in the high-security lab.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian on Friday rejected allegations that the lab was responsible for the outbreak.

"A discerning person will understand at a glance that the purpose is to create confusion, divert public attention, and shirk

their responsibility," said Zhao, who himself promoted conspiracy theories the US army may have brought the virus to China.

Scientists believe the virus originated in bats before being passed to humans through an intermediary species.

But a study by a group of Chinese scientists published in The Lancet in January revealed that the first COVID-19 patient had no connection to Wuhan's infamous animal market, and neither did 13 of the first 41 confirmed cases.

However, France on Friday said there was no evidence so far of a link between the new coronavirus and the work of the P4 research

laboratory in Wuhan.

General Mark Milley, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, said on Tuesday that US intelligence indicates that the coronavirus likely occurred naturally, as opposed to being created in the laboratory in China, but there is no certainty either way.

On Friday's press briefing, Trump also cast doubt on China's death toll, which was revised up on Friday. China said 1,300 people who died of the coronavirus in Wuhan - half the total - were not counted, but dismissed allegations of a cover-up.

The US president said on Friday that many more people must have died in China than in the United States, which is currently the epicenter of the global pandemic and has reported the largest number of deaths in the world linked to the virus.

Meanwhile, the World Health Organization (WHO) said the sharp upward revision in China's coronavirus death toll was "an attempt to leave no case undocumented".

Trump has condemned the WHO for the support it has given to China's approach in the crisis. He suspended funding to the UN agency this week.

Meanwhile, Congressional Republicans have urged Trump to condition US funding for the WHO on the resignation of its chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus over his handling of the Coronavirus pandemic.

The Republicans have accused Tedros of being too willing to believe Beijing and of brushing off a Taiwanese warning on the ease of viral transmission.

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

LATEST UPDATES

OVER 2.25M CORONAVIRUS CASES

More than 2,251,690 declared cases have been registered in 193 countries and territories since the epidemic first emerged in China in December. Of these cases, at least 497,600 are now considered recovered. In the United States, now the epicentre of the pandemic, the death toll stood at 37,079 with 706,779 infections. At least 59,672 patients have recovered. Italy is the next most-affected country with 22,745 deaths and 172,434 confirmed infections. It is followed by Spain with 20,043 fatalities and 191,726 confirmed infections, France with 18,681 deaths and 147,969 infections and Britain with 14,576 deaths and 108,692 cases.

THAI PREMIER MOCKED

An appeal to Thailand's 20 richest tycoons for help in easing the impact of the pandemic by Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha has been mocked online by social media users, who accused the kingdom's premier of running a "beggar government". Thailand's tourism and export-reliant economy has been hit hard by the outbreak, with the state bank predicting growth will contract by five percent this year -- the worst result since the 1997 Asian financial crisis.

SPAIN REPORTS 20,000 DEATHS

The death toll from the coronavirus in Spain, the country hit hardest by the pandemic after the United States and Italy, moved past 20,000 yesterday, the health ministry said. A total of 20,043 people have now succumbed to the disease, which killed 565 people in Spain in the past 24 hours, slightly down on the 585 reported on Friday. The number of declared cases has risen to 191,726, the ministry said. However, the increase in infections has slowed in recent days while the number deemed cured has risen to nearly 75,000.

HIMALAYAN TREKKERS STRANDED

Around 1,000 foreign adventurers are stranded in Nepal's capital, stunned to discover the scale of the coronavirus pandemic, after being rescued from their Himalayan treks. The country's lockdown caused authorities to close the isolated trails and trekkers were ushered down to pick-up points and airports. Most of the group are now stuck in Kathmandu's tourist district, where a few hotels have stayed open and some restaurants prepare free food.

SINGAPORE INFECTIONS SURGE

Singapore announced more than 900 new cases of coronavirus Saturday, a new record high, with nearly all infections traced to packed dormitories housing foreign workers. Around 200,000 mostly South Asian workers live in 43 dorms across the island, forming an essential part of the country's workforce.

UK QUEEN FOREGOES BIRTHDAY GUN SALUTE

Britain's Queen Elizabeth II will not celebrate her birthday on Tuesday with a traditional gun salute due to the coronavirus crisis, Buckingham Palace said yesterday. The queen, who turns 94 on Tuesday, made a rare national address at Easter, saying that "we know that coronavirus will not overcome us" and that "we will meet again" after the country's lockdown is lifted.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

Republicans urge Trump to withhold funds unless WHO chief quits

France says no evidence COVID-19 linked to Wuhan research lab

we're going to find out," Trump told reporters at the White House on Friday.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said US officials are doing a "full investigation" into how the virus "got out into the world".

The Washington Post and Fox News both quoted anonymous sources who voiced concern



This photo shows empty Bosphorus Bridge in Istanbul yesterday, as Turkish government announced a two-day curfew to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

PHOTO: AFP

Italy claims victory over virus in poorer south

AFP, Rome

Italian health officials declared a long-sought victory Friday over the coronavirus in poorer southern regions that were less prepared for the pandemic than the richer north.

Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte had warned six weeks ago that Italy's ability to conquer COVID-19 depended on whether cases can stay largely contained to its northern epicentre around Milan.

The disease has now officially claimed 22,745 lives in the Mediterranean country of 60 million people -- a toll second only to the United States.

But Italy has still counted itself relatively lucky because the outbreak erupted in provinces with the best equipped medical staff.

Conte decided to gamble early by imposing the Western world's first peacetime national lockdown while the disease was still gathering force.

His team argued that the short-term economic pain would pay off by saving the health care system and allowing the country to gradually reopen in the weeks to come.

Italy's top health officials said Friday that Conte's big bet had paid off. The latest data from Italy's civil protection service offered new reasons for Conte not to extend some of the strictest measures when they expire on May 4.

They showed the number of people currently being treated for COVID-19 rising by only a few hundred for the first time since the outbreak began.

The current number of cases had been going up by at least 1,000 a day for over a month.

However, business leaders charge that Conte is doing unnecessary damage to the economy by extending the shutdown for too long.

The leaders of Italy's northern industrial heartland are pushing Conte to take another gamble and open as many businesses and industries as possible in early May.

Global coronavirus concert to honour health workers

The Rolling Stones was to join a star-studded global television broadcast to honour healthcare workers on the front lines of the battle against the coronavirus pandemic. The two-hour "One World: Together at Home" event, a combination of music, comedy and stories from doctors, nurses and grocery workers, will be broadcast across multiple North American and international television networks. The Stones join a lineup that includes Celine Dion, Billie Eilish, John Legend, Elton John, Paul McCartney, Chris Martin, Andrea Bocelli and Michael Buble. The television broadcast will be preceded by a six-hour live streaming event with appearances by major sports stars and dozens of other singers, actors and social media influencers. Participants will appear remotely.

Iranian teen shocks chess grandmaster Carlsen



A 16-year-old Iranian chess prodigy has upended the chess world by beating World Chess Champion Magnus Carlsen in the final of the Banter Blitz Cup. Alireza Firouzja defeated the Norwegian 8.5-7.5 in the final of the online quickfire knockout contest to claim the \$14,000 prize. Chess fans won't have to wait long to see a rematch between the pair, as they face off once again on April 20 in the \$250,000 Magnus Carlsen Invitational. The competition, hosted by Carlsen, will pit eight of the world's best players against each other for the record prize.

Islamic militants kill 11 Philippine troops

Islamic State-linked militants killed 11 Philippine soldiers and wounded 14 others Friday in the group's deadliest attack in over a year, the military said. The extremists belong to Abu Sayyaf -- a group based in the southern Philippines that has engaged in bombings as well as kidnappings of Western tourists and missionaries for ransom since the early 1990s. They also have ties to Islamic State militants seeking to set up a caliphate in Southeast Asia. Regional military commander Lieutenant-General Cirilito Sobejana told reporters Abu Sayyaf carried out the attack, adding the soldiers were ambushed and had been pursuing security operations against the militants in Sulu province.

SOURCE: AFP

Trump accused of 'fomenting rebellion' after 'LIBERATE' tweets

AGENCIES

Washington Governor Jay Inslee on Friday accused Donald Trump of "fomenting domestic rebellion and spreading lies" after the United States president urged supporters to "LIBERATE" three states led by Democratic governors.

"The president's statements this morning encourage illegal and dangerous acts. He is putting millions of people in danger of contracting COVID-19," Inslee said in a series of tweets on Friday afternoon.

"His unhinged rantings and calls for people to 'liberate' states could also lead to violence. We've seen it before," Inslee added. "The president is fomenting domestic rebellion and spreading lies - even while his own administration says the virus is real, it is deadly and we have a long way to go before restrictions can be lifted."

Inslee's tweets came after Trump apparently encouraged the growing protests against the stay-at-home restrictions aimed at stopping the coronavirus.

"LIBERATE MINNESOTA!" "LIBERATE MICHIGAN!" "LIBERATE VIRGINIA," Trump said in a tweet-storm in which he also lashed out at New York Governor Andrew Cuomo for criticising the federal response. Cuomo "should spend more time 'doing



and less time 'complaining,'" the president said.

The president's tweets marked a different tone from the day before, when Trump said it was up to state governors to decide when and how to reopen their economies. The Trump administration on Thursday unveiled a phased approach to the reopening of the economy, saying governors would be calling their "own shots" while the federal government stood "alongside" them.

Trump has repeatedly expressed his desire to see businesses reopen quickly and claimed earlier this week that he possesses "total authority" over the matter, even

though the lockdowns and other social-distancing measures have been imposed by state and local leaders, not Washington, DC.

Some states did take some of the nation's first, small steps towards loosening restrictions.

In Florida, Republican Governor Ron DeSantis gave the green light for municipalities to reopen beaches and parks if they could do so safely. In Texas, Republican Governor Greg Abbott said stores could begin selling items curbside, non-essential surgery could resume, and state parks could reopen.

But governors of both parties Friday suggested they would be cautious in returning to normal, with some of them warning that they cannot do it without help from Washington to expand testing.

West Virginia Governor Jim Justice, a Republican ally of Trump, said he would listen to medical experts in deciding how to move forward.

The shutdowns have inflicted heavy damage on economies around the world. In the US, the crisis has cost at least 22 million Americans their jobs, pushing the unemployment rate towards levels not seen since the Great Depression in the early 1930s.

Horror at Canada nursing home

AFP, Montreal

Elderly residents left soiled and unfed after their caregivers fled the premises, 31 deaths in the space of a few weeks: a nursing home in Montreal has become the symbol of the terrible toll coronavirus is taking in Canada's long-term care homes.

The bleak situation discovered at the Residence Herron, in the Montreal suburb of Dorval, has triggered an investigation for gross negligence and a national reckoning about the conditions in long-term care homes which account for half the country's more than 1,250 COVID-19 deaths.

"I was sick to my stomach. I was really sick to my stomach," Moira Davis, whose father Stanley Pinnell died at the Herron facility on April 8, told AFP.

"All of a sudden these questions started flying through my head. 'What could we have done differently? Why did nobody tell us?... Why, why, why?'"

Called to the rescue after most of the staff deserted the facility, health authorities found residents dehydrated, unfed for days and lying listless in bed, some covered in excrement. Others had fallen to the floor. Two deaths had gone unnoticed for several days. At least five of the 31 recent deaths at the home have been officially attributed to the virus, with the others still being investigated by a coroner.

For families, shock and anger mixed with the frustration of having been powerless to do anything, kept away by a ban on visits to the home to avoid contamination.

Local health authorities have now taken control of the facility, and a Can\$5 million class action has been launched against the owner alleging "inhumane and degrading maltreatment" for failing to ensure continued and adequate care.



A doctor uses a swab to gather sample from the nose of a homeless woman as she tests her for coronavirus in Miami, Florida, on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

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