

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC LATEST UPDATES

NEARLY 4 MILLION CASES

At least 274,617 people have died of the novel coronavirus so far, according to an AFP tally at 1900 GMT yesterday. There have been more than 3,946,130 recorded cases spanning 195 countries and territories.

DEADLY FOOD DISTRIBUTION

At least six people were killed in Afghanistan's western province of Ghor as clashes broke out between police forces and protesters during a demonstration against alleged mismanagement of aid to alleviate the effects of the pandemic.

CHINA ADMITS 'SHORTCOMINGS'

The coronavirus outbreak exposed "shortcomings" in China's public healthcare system, a top health official admitted yesterday, saying that reforms are underway to improve the country's disease prevention and control mechanisms.

BOLSONARO 'BIGGEST THREAT'

The Lancet, a leading medical journal, has described President Jair Bolsonaro as "perhaps the biggest threat" to Brazil's ability to successfully fight the coronavirus pandemic. On Friday, Brazil's Ministry of Health registered 10,222 new confirmed coronavirus cases and 751 related deaths, a daily high.

PENCE SPOKESWOMAN POSITIVE

The US vice president's spokeswoman Katie Miller became the second White House staffer this week to test positive for coronavirus, officials said Friday. Miller is spokeswoman for Vice President Mike Pence, giving her frequent access to high-level meetings.

AMERICANS OPPOSE REOPENING

A large majority of Americans oppose reopening the country now, with Democrats and Republicans sharply divided on the question, according to a poll published on Friday. Sixty-four percent of those polled by ABC News/ Ipsos said opening the country now is not worth it because it will mean more lives lost to the coronavirus.

10,000 MORE CASES IN RUSSIA

Russian authorities yesterday said they had recorded 10,817 new cases of the coronavirus in the last day, pushing the nationwide tally to 198,676. Russia's coronavirus taskforce said that 104 people had died overnight, bringing the national death toll to 1,827.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

Eyes key route for virus infection: study

THE STRAITS TIMES/ANN

The eyes are a key route by which the novel coronavirus infects humans, a study by the University of Hong Kong has found, in addition to the upper respiratory tract, which includes the nose, mouth and throat.

The study made public on Friday also found that Sars-Cov-2 - the strain of coronavirus that causes the Covid-19 disease - was up to 100 times more infectious than the severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars) virus, or Sars-Cov, and bird flu viruses such as H5N1, reported news agency Xinhua.

The research team led by Dr Michael Chan Chi Wai, an associate professor at the university's School of Public Health, found that the coronavirus is much more efficient in infecting the human conjunctiva - the tissue lining the surface of the eye - and the upper respiratory airways, and its level of infection is comparable to that observed for H1N1, the swine flu virus that caused a pandemic in 2009.

"This explains the higher transmissibility of Covid-19 than that of Sars. This study also highlights the fact that eyes may be an important route of Sars-Cov-2 human infection," Dr Chan said, according to the South China Morning Post.

The research team had previously discovered that the coronavirus remains alive for up to seven days on smooth surfaces such as stainless steel, glass and plastic. It is therefore possible for people to get infected when they touch these surfaces with their hands and then touch their face.

The study was published in the latest issue of The Lancet Respiratory Medicine. According to SCMP, it was assumed in the early stages of the coronavirus crisis that medical personnel would be sufficiently protected by wearing N95 face masks and protective clothing, and did not need specialist glasses. These latest findings by Dr Chan's team, it says, challenge that assumption.

The Covid-19 outbreak first came to light in late December after cases were detected in the Chinese city of Wuhan.



An Ilyushin Il-78 air tanker and a Russian Tupolev Tu-160 strategic bomber fly over the Kremlin and Red Square in downtown Moscow to mark the 75th anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany in World War Two, yesterday. President Vladimir Putin told Russians they are "invincible" when they stand together as the country marked occasion amid lockdown due to halt the spread of coronavirus.

PHOTO: AFP

China, Russia coordinating on virus conspiracies

Accuses US, prevents UNSC vote on pandemic truce

AFP, Washington

The United States has accused China and Russia of stepping up cooperation to spread false narratives over the coronavirus pandemic, saying Beijing was increasingly adopting techniques honed by Moscow.

"Even before the COVID-19 crisis we assessed a certain level of coordination between Russia and the PRC in the realm of propaganda," said Lea Gabrielle, coordinator of the State Department's Global Engagement Center, which tracks foreign propaganda.

"But with this pandemic the cooperation has accelerated rapidly," she told reporters.

"We see this convergence as a result of what we consider to be pragmatism between the two actors who want to shape public understanding of the COVID pandemic for their own purposes," she said.

The Global Engagement Center earlier said thousands of Russian-linked social media accounts were spreading conspiracies about the pandemic, including charging that the virus first detected last year in the Chinese metropolis of Wuhan was created by the United States.

China outraged the United States when a foreign ministry spokesman tweeted a conspiracy that the

US military brought the virus to Wuhan, but the two countries reached an informal rhetorical truce in late March after telephone talks between President Donald Trump and his counterpart Xi Jinping.

Tensions have again soared as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo pushes the theory that the virus originated in a Wuhan laboratory, a stance that Beijing in turn calls disinformation.

Both the World Health Organization and the US government's top epidemiologist say there is no evidence the virus came from a lab.

China and Russia often find common cause and clash with the United States on issues from Venezuela to the use of economic sanctions to disarmament.

At United Nations, US on Friday stunned other members of the UN Security Council by preventing a vote on a resolution for a ceasefire in various conflicts around the world to help troubled nations better fight the coronavirus pandemic, diplomats said. Washington's reversal came a day after it agreed to the text, negotiators said under cover of anonymity.

The latest stalemate continues to leave the global peace and security body largely mute in the face of a once-in-a-century pandemic that has killed more than 270,000 people.

Trump, Saudi king reaffirm defense ties

AGENCIES

President Donald Trump and Saudi Arabia's King Salman spoke by phone on Friday and "reaffirmed the strong United States-Saudi defense partnership," the White House said, amid tensions over Saudi's oil output.

The two men spoke after news the United States planned to withdraw two Patriot anti-missile batteries from Saudi Arabia that have been a defense against Iran.

Trump had worked last month to persuade Saudi Arabia to cut its oil output after an increase in production during the early stages of the coronavirus pandemic put heavy pressure on U.S. oil producers.

"The two leaders agreed on the importance of stability in global energy markets, and reaffirmed the strong United States-Saudi defense partnership," White House spokesman Judd Deere said. "The president and King Salman also discussed other critical regional and bilateral issues and their cooperation as leaders of the G7 and G20, respectively."

The statement did not mention the Patriot missiles and the White House declined further comment.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo confirmed on Friday media reports that the missiles would be withdrawn, but he said it did not signal a decrease in US support for Saudi Arabia and was not an effort to pressure Riyadh on oil issues. He also said it did not mean Washington thought Iran was no longer a threat.

"Those Patriot batteries had been in place for some time. Those troops needed to get back," Pompeo told the Ben Shapiro radio show. "This was a normal rotation of forces."



Police detain demonstrators during a protest against India's newly inaugurated link road to the Chinese border, in Kathmandu, yesterday. Nepal objected to a newly inaugurated link road to the Chinese border by India that crosses a disputed area with Nepal, as police detained protestors against the move in Kathmandu.

PHOTO: AFP

Indian protesters carry dead bodies into gas leak plant

AFP, Vishakhapatnam

Angry protesters carrying dead bodies stormed an Indian chemical plant yesterday to demand the facility's closure after a toxic gas leak that killed 12 people days earlier.

Thursday's pre-dawn accident in the industrial port city of Visakhapatnam injured hundreds and knocked many unconscious as they tried to flee the area.

State government officials had arrived to conduct a safety tour of the plant, owned by South Korea's LG Chem, when a crowd of around 300 people barged past police and security guards.

Some helped cart stretchers bearing three victims of the disaster. They chanted slogans demanding justice for the dead and the shutdown of the plant before they were pushed back by security.

Relatives of the dead stood nearby, many in tears. At least three children were among the dead and dozens remain in hospital.

Authorities have started a manslaughter investigation over the leak and India's environmental tribunal has already fined the company \$6.2 million as a preliminary punishment.

ALARMING DEFORESTATION IN AMAZON Brazil to deploy troops

REUTERS, Brasilia

Deforestation in Brazil's Amazon rainforest rose sharply in April, government data showed on Friday, as the coronavirus outbreak keeps many environmental enforcers out of the field and the country prepares to deploy troops to fight illegal logging.

Destruction in Brazil's portion of the Amazon increased 64% in April, compared with the same month a year ago, according to preliminary satellite data from space research agency INPE.

In the first four months of the year, Amazon deforestation was up 55% from a year ago to 1,202 square kilometers (464 square miles), according to the INPE data.

The Amazon is the world's largest tropical rainforest, and scientists say its preservation is vital to curb global warming because of the vast amount of greenhouse gas that it absorbs.

Destruction of the Amazon surged to an 11-year high last year and continues to climb in 2020, which environmentalists blame on the policies of right-wing President Jair Bolsonaro who has emboldened illegal loggers, miners and ranchers.

Bolsonaro has called for more farming and mining in protected areas of the forest, saying it is the only way to lift the region out of poverty.

The new coronavirus outbreak has complicated efforts to combat deforestation, with environmental enforcement agency Ibama sending fewer agents into the field due to health risks. The agency has said it will scale back field agents in other at-risk areas but not the Amazon.



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