

Trump walks back on threat after outrage

REUTERS, Washington

US President Donald Trump on Friday tried to walk back a Twitter threat to respond with deadly force to three days of violent protests in Minneapolis over the police killing of an unarmed black man.

After his online comment that "looting leads to shooting" drew a warning from Twitter and widespread condemnation from Democrats, Trump said he understood why the killing had sparked nationwide protests about police violence against African Americans.

But he added that they should not be allowed to turn to "lawless anarchy."

"The looters should not be allowed to drown out the voices of so many peaceful protesters," he said at the White House. "I understand the hurt, I understand the pain."

Trump said he had expressed his sorrow to the family of George Floyd.

Trump has a history of inflaming racial tensions. He blamed "both sides" for violence between white supremacists and left-wing counter protesters in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017 and has called some immigrants crossing the US-Mexico border rapists.

His early Friday tweet suggested that security forces would open fire on looters to curtail unrest over Floyd's death.

Trump said in his tweet: "These THUGS are dishonoring the memory of George Floyd, and I won't let that happen. Just spoke to Governor Tim Walz and told him that the Military is with him all the way. Any difficulty and we will assume control but, when the looting starts, the shooting starts. Thank you!"



A protestor gestures in front of a burning shop during a demonstration against the death in Minneapolis police custody of African-American man George Floyd, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, early yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

KILLING OF AFRO-AMERICAN MAN IN US

Unrest flares in US cities

Cop charged with murder; curfew imposed in Minneapolis

AFP, Minneapolis

The Minneapolis police officer accused of killing a handcuffed African-American man was charged with murder Friday, but the move failed to quell surging anger as tense protests erupted in cities across the nation.

Demonstrations raged from New York to Los Angeles, and from Atlanta where police cruisers were set ablaze, to Washington where protesters faced off with Secret Service agents outside the White House.

In Minneapolis, Derek Chauvin, the white officer filmed kneeling on the neck of a handcuffed and unarmed George Floyd for nearly nine minutes, was charged with one count of third-degree murder -- unintentionally causing a death -- and one count of negligent manslaughter.

But the charges failed to calm a shaken nation whose deep wounds over racial inequality have been torn

open anew.

Authorities imposed a curfew Friday in Minneapolis after three nights of violent protests left parts of the city in flames. But protesters defiantly remained on the streets, sometimes dodging tear gas canisters fired into crowds by police.

Protester Naema Jakes said she needed to be on the streets so she could verbally confront officers.

"I need you to look in my eyes and feel me," Jakes said. "This is pain, this is hurt."

The 46-year-old Floyd's relatives -- who spoke Friday with President Donald Trump -- welcomed news of the arrest as a "step on the road to justice," but said they hoped for tougher charges and action against the other 3 officers involved in Floyd's detention and death.

All four were fired from the police department Tuesday after video surfaced of Monday's arrest.

The announcement of charges came hours after hundreds of troops were deployed to the streets of Minneapolis and St. Paul to try to prevent a fourth night of violent protests.

Scores of buildings have been burned and looted across the so-called Twin Cities, including a police station associated with the four officers.

Mayor Jacob Frey declared a night-long curfew Friday and Saturday as protesters appeared on the streets in Minneapolis again Friday.

Some chanted "I can't breathe" -- Floyd's words as Chauvin's knee pressed on his neck.

Former president Barack Obama said in a statement that he shared the "anguish" of millions of Americans over Floyd's death. Former vice president Joe Biden, who is challenging Trump for the White House in November's election, also spoke to Floyd's family.

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Is 'herd immunity' closer than previously thought?

AFP, Paris

Study suggests between 40 and 60pc of the population could be immunized without being exposed to virus

Another study suggests infection in 10-20 percent of population is enough to achieve 'herd immunity'

Could exposure to the coronaviruses that cause the common cold help protect against COVID-19? Is herd immunity closer than previously thought?

As nations lift lockdowns and experts worry about a potential second peak in cases, our ability to ward off infection is one of the hottest topics of scientific debate.

Ever since it became apparent that children were less vulnerable to COVID-19 early in the pandemic, scientists have speculated that the regular spread of benign viruses in places like schools could have bolstered their immune response to the latest coronavirus.

Now the idea of "cross immunity" among the broader population is gaining some ground.

In a recent post on Twitter, Francois Balloux of University College London noted an "intriguing" lack of an immediate resurgence in COVID-19 cases following the easing of lockdowns in several countries. Among the possible explanations, he noted, were seasonality and enduring social distancing practices.

But he posited a "wilder" hypothesis as well -- that a "proportion of the population might have pre-existing immunity to #SARSCoV2, potentially due to prior exposure to 'common cold' coronaviruses".

Balloux said that might explain issues like cases where there is no transmission between spouses.

Earlier this month, an American study in the journal Cell suggested between 40 and 60 percent of the population could be immunized against COVID-19 without ever being exposed to it.

Researchers put this down to the action of protective cells, known as T lymphocytes, that had been activated by other coronaviruses responsible for colds.

But authors Alessandro Sette and Shane Crotty, of La Jolla Institute for Immunology, cautioned that the research did not suggest the epidemic was running out of steam.

"Our study suggests that preexisting immunity might be one of the factors to be considered; but at this point is simply a hypothesis that needs to be addressed with further experiments," they told AFP by email.

The World Health Organization has also expressed caution over the issue saying lack

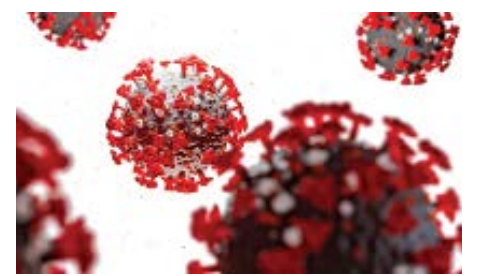
of empirical studies.

WHO's Michael Ryan at a press conference this week said: "There is certainly some evidence with regard to T cells, that if you have a previous coronavirus infection you may be able to mount a more rapid response to COVID-19".

Another uncertainty is whether everyone is equally vulnerable to catching COVID-19. A growing number of scientists think maybe not, raising questions over assumptions for what is known as herd immunity.

In theory this could explain why early estimates of the proportion of individuals who have been infected by the new coronavirus have been lower than expected -- at around 5 to 10 percent of the total population in several countries.

It could also mean a lower threshold for herd immunity -- when a sufficient part of the population has caught the virus, starving it of new hosts to spread to and thereby stopping the epidemic. This threshold, commonly accepted as around 60 to 70 percent of



the population infected, is what Sweden hoped to achieve by deciding against a strict lockdown.

Gabriela Gomes, a researcher at the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, said that mathematical models on herd immunity often "ignore individual variation". According to a study she co-authored, which has not yet been peer reviewed, the threshold might be reached when just 10 to 20 percent of the population has been infected.

At the Pitie-Salpetriere hospital in Paris, professor of emergency medicine Yonathan Freund has noticed a sharp drop in the number of infections among doctors compared with the start of the epidemic.

"This is pure speculation but it could mean that people have natural or acquired immunity," he told AFP.

With infections staying low three weeks after France lifted its strict lockdown measures, he thinks that could mean "the second wave is not coming and probably will not happen" in the country.

SHARING TOOLS TO BATTLE COVID-19

WHO, 37 countries launch alliance

REUTERS, Zurich

Thirty-seven countries and the World Health Organization (WHO) appealed on Friday for common ownership of vaccines, medicines and diagnostic tools to tackle the global coronavirus pandemic, taking aim at patent laws they fear could become a barrier to sharing crucial supplies.

While the push by mostly developing nations, called the COVID-19 Technology Access Pool, won praise from groups including Doctors Without Borders, a drug industry alliance questioned if the effort to pool intellectual property would really broaden access to medicines.

Developing and some small nations fear rich countries pumping resources into finding vaccines - more than 100 are in development - will muscle their way to the front of the queue, once a candidate succeeds.

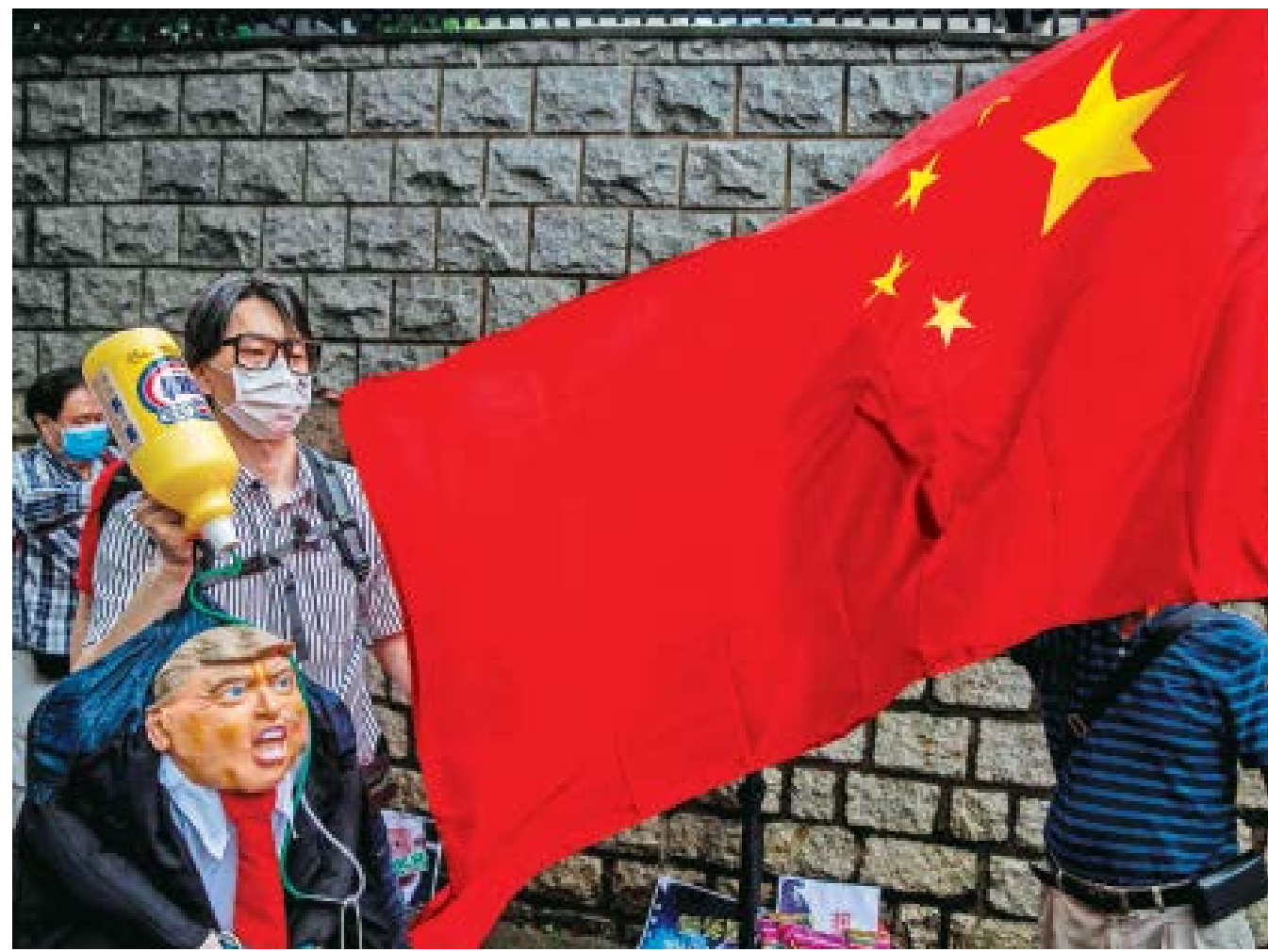
"Vaccines, tests, diagnostics, treatments and other key tools in the coronavirus response must be made universally available as global public goods," said Costa Rica President Carlos Alvarado.

The effort, originally proposed in March, aims to provide a one-stop shop for scientific knowledge, data and intellectual property.

"WHO recognises the important role that patents play in fuelling innovation but this is a time when people must take priority," WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told an online news briefing.

Anna Marriott, health policy manager for anti-poverty group Oxfam, said the divide over how to handle patents illustrated how some regions could wind up losers.

"The pharmaceutical industry's attempt to rubbish the World Health Organisation's initiative suggests they care more for profits than people's health," she said.



A pro-China activist holds an effigy of US President Donald Trump during a protest outside the US consulate in Hong Kong yesterday after US said it would strip several of Hong Kong's special privileges.

PHOTO: AFP

Israel police kill Palestinian they thought was armed

Israeli police in annexed east Jerusalem yesterday shot dead a Palestinian with special needs they mistakenly thought was armed with a pistol, Israeli and Palestinian sources said. The incident happened in the alleys of the walled Old City near Lions' Gate, an access point mainly used by Palestinians. The Palestinians' official news agency Wafa identified the dead man as Eyad Hallak, a resident of the Wadi Joz neighbourhood of east Jerusalem with special needs. There has been an uptick in violence in east Jerusalem and the occupied West Bank in recent days, although it has yet to reach the levels of 2015-2016 when Israeli security forces struggled to stop a wave of so-called lone wolf attacks unconnected to any established militant group.

Afghanistan says ready for dialogue with Taliban

A top Afghan official appointed to lead the much-awaited peace talks with the Taliban yesterday said his team was ready to start dialogue with the insurgents "at any moment". Abdullah Abdullah said an ongoing lull in violence triggered by a surprise ceasefire offered by the insurgents had set the tone for launching discussions. Peace talks between the government and Taliban were scheduled to begin before March 10. US President Donald Trump's administration has made it a priority to end America's longest war, and US officials have pushed the Taliban and government leaders to hold peace talks in a bid to pull out foreign forces.

Merkel a 'no' for Trump's in-person G7 summit



German Chancellor Angela Merkel will not attend an in-person summit of G7 leaders that US President Donald Trump has suggested he will host despite concerns over the coronavirus pandemic, the Politico website quoted her spokesman as saying Friday. Leaders from the Group of Seven, which the United States heads this year, had been scheduled to meet by videoconference in late June after COVID-19 scuttled plans to gather in-person at Camp David, the US presidential retreat in the state of Maryland. Trump last week, however, indicated that he could hold the huge gathering after all. Merkel, a scientist by training, has declined. "As of today, considering the overall pandemic situation, she cannot agree to her personal participation, to a journey to Washington," German government spokesman Steffen Seibert told Politico. "The federal chancellor thanks President Trump for his invitation to the G7 summit," he said.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

FIRST ANNIVERSARY OF BJP-LED GOVT'S SECOND TERM IN INDIA

CAA a major achievement

Says Modi; opposition asks govt not to lose touch with ground realities

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

The controversial amendment to the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which sparked prolonged street protests across India, was yesterday cited by Prime Minister Narendra Modi as one of the major achievements of his government.

In an open letter written by Modi to India's citizens on the first anniversary of his second term as prime minister, he said the amended law was an "expression of India's compassion and spirit of inclusiveness".

Modi also mentioned abrogation of Article 370 of Indian constitution, which gave Jammu and Kashmir a special Constitutional status, settlement of the Ram Temple issue and criminalisation of instant triple talaq among other key achievements during this time.

CAA, passed by both Houses of parliament in December last year, seeks to grant citizenship to non-Muslims from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan on the ground of religious persecution. However, critics

alleged that the amended CAA was "discriminatory."

The CAA and the National Register of Citizens, which aim at keeping out "illegal" immigrants from Bangladesh, had caused concerns in Bangladesh.

He said in 2019 general elections the



people of India voted not merely for continuity but also with the dream of taking India to new heights and making it a global leader.

The decisions taken in the last one year are directed at fulfilling this dream, he said.

"Article 370 (abrogation) furthered the spirit of national unity and

integration," he said Jammu and Kashmir bifurcation.

Referring to the Supreme Court's unanimous judgement on the Ram temple in Ayodhya, Modi said it brought an amicable end to a debate persisting for centuries.

However, several opposition leaders attacked the government.

The government should not lose touch with ground realities, former Uttar Pradesh chief minister and BSP chief Mayawati said.

The Congress in a statement titled "Helpless People, Heartless Government" said that India saw a "year of disappointment, disastrous management and diabolical pain".

"2 Crore Jobs vs. 27% unemployment: Modi came to power promising 2 crore jobs a year. But India witnessed the Highest Unemployment Rate in the last 45 years reached in 2017-18 (6.1% overall - 7.8% in Urban India and 5.3% in Rural India). Post Covid, India's unemployment rate has soared to an unprecedented 27.1% (CMIE)," the statement added.

India eases lockdown despite record cases

AGENCIES

India yesterday announced a major relaxation of the world's biggest coronavirus lockdown from early June, except for so-called "containment zones" with high numbers of infections.

The announcement came after the country reported a record daily jump of 7,964 new COVID-19 infections yesterday.

A home ministry order said that places of religious worship, hotels, restaurants and shopping malls "will be allowed" to operate from June 8, while educational establishments will be opened "after consultations" with Indian state authorities.

Earlier yesterday, in an open letter marking one year into his second term, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi appealed to the country's population of 1.3 billion to follow all lockdown rules to stop the spread of the pandemic.

The prime minister said there was a "long battle" ahead against the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19.

"Our country (is) besieged with problems amidst a vast population and limited resources," Modi said, adding that labourers and migrant workers had "undergone tremendous suffering" due to restrictions.

India has recorded a total of 173,763 COVID-19 cases and 4,971 deaths, making it the ninth most-affected country globally, Reuters data showed.

While fatality rates in India have been lower than in worse-hit countries, experts warned that its peak has not been reached due to mounting cases of new infections.

Officials are also nervous about the pandemic spreading through villages as millions of jobless migrant workers return home from cities.

Over 100 migrant workers have died either in accidents or due to starvation as they desperately tried to head back to their villages, the home ministry official said.