

CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK

WHO puts mortality rate at 3.4 percent

Says virus still containable

AGENCIES

COVID-19, the disease caused by the new coronavirus, has killed about 3.4 percent of confirmed cases, globally, according to the World Health Organization (WHO) - a figure higher than previous estimates and far above the seasonal flu's fatality rate of less than 1 percent.

However, the global spread of the new type of virus can still be controlled, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said on Tuesday, urging countries to step up containment efforts and measures to protect front-line doctors and nurses.

"Globally, about 3.4 percent of COVID-19 cases have died. By comparison, seasonal flu generally kills far fewer than 1 percent of those infected," he told reporters in Geneva, outlining the main differences between the two respiratory illnesses.

"To summarise, COVID-19 spreads less efficiently than flu. Transmission does not appear to be driven by people who are not sick, and it causes more severe illness than flu. There are not yet any vaccines or therapeutics, and it can be contained, which is why we must do everything we can to contain it."

Symptoms of COVID-19 can include fever, runny nose, cough and breathing trouble. Most people develop only mild disease and many have recovered. But some, usually those with other medical complications, develop more severe symptoms, including pneumonia, which can be fatal.



Migrants carry an injured man near the Turkey's Pazarkule border crossing with Greece's Kastanies, near Edirne, Turkey, yesterday. Turkish officials said Greek forces killed a migrant and wounded five others yesterday as they tried to cross the border between the two countries, a claim rejected by Greece as "utterly fake news".

PHOTO: REUTERS

NEWSIN brief

Virus fears: Tajikistan closes mosques

REUTERS, Dushanbe

Tajikistan's national council of clerics told mosques to suspend public gatherings, including Friday prayers but excluding burial rites, to protect against the coronavirus, even though the country has not reported any cases. The Muslim-majority Central Asian nation of 9 million people bordering China and Afghanistan has shut its border to citizens from both neighbours as well as South Korea, Iran and Italy, all hard hit by the coronavirus. The outbreak originated in China.

2 Turkish soldiers killed in Syria

AFP, Ankara

Two Turkish soldiers were killed by Syrian government forces in the northwestern region of Idlib, Turkey's defence ministry said yesterday. Six others were wounded in the shelling, it said, adding that Turkish forces "immediately" retaliated against regime targets. More than 50 Turkish soldiers have been killed in the rebel-held region in recent weeks, including 34 who died in an air strike on Thursday.

21 killed as torrential rain batters Brazil

AFP, Sao Paulo

At least 21 people have been killed in torrential rain that hit the Brazilian states of Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, triggering flash floods and destroying homes, authorities said Tuesday. Another 32 people are missing in Sao Paulo, raising fears the toll could rise further. Violent storms in recent days have dumped a month's worth of rain on some areas in a matter of hours, devastating the southern coast of Sao Paulo state and poor neighborhoods on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro.

Two coronavirus types identified in China

REUTERS, Shanghai

Scientists in China studying the coronavirus outbreak said they had found two main types of the disease could be causing infections.

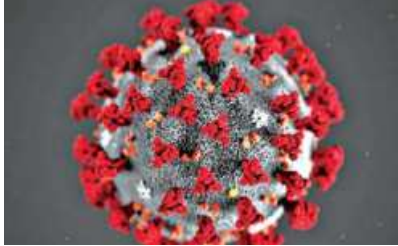
The researchers, from Peking University's School of Life Sciences and the Institut Pasteur of Shanghai under the Chinese Academy of Sciences, cautioned that their analysis examined a limited range of data, and said follow-up studies of larger data sets are needed to better understand the virus's evolution.

The preliminary study found that a more aggressive type of the new coronavirus associated with the disease outbreak in Wuhan accounted for about 70% of analysed strains, while 30% was linked to a less aggressive type.

The prevalence of the more aggressive virus decreased after early January 2020, they said.

"These findings strongly support an urgent need for further immediate,

comprehensive studies that combine genomic data, epidemiological data, and chart records of the clinical symptoms of patients with coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)," they wrote.



Their findings were published on Tuesday in the National Science Review, the journal of the Chinese Academy of Sciences.

Also on Wednesday, one of China's top medical associations confirmed that the median incubation period of the coronavirus is five to seven days and the maximum 14 days.

The remarks by Du Bin, chairman of the critical care medical branch of the Chinese Medical Association, mark the most conclusive assessment of the virus' incubation period by a government-affiliated medical organization to date.

The revelations came amid a fall in new coronavirus cases following crippling restrictions imposed on the world's second largest economy to stop its spread, including transport suspensions and the extension of the Lunar New Year holiday.

Mainland China had 119 new confirmed cases of coronavirus on Tuesday, the National Health Commission said, down from 125 the previous day, in a broad trend that has seen numbers of new cases fall from the middle of February.

The total number of cases on the mainland has now reached 80,270. The number of deaths rose by 38 to bring the total toll for mainland China to 2,981 by March 3.

US launches first airstrike against Taliban since deal

Insurgents step up attack on Afghan forces; 20 killed

AFP, Kabul

The US launched an airstrike against Taliban fighters to defend Afghan forces yesterday, an American military spokesman said, as violence spirals after a string of deadly attacks by the insurgents, throwing the country's nascent peace process into grave doubt.

News of the airstrike in southern Helmand province -- the first in 11 days -- came hours after US President Donald Trump told reporters he had had a "very good" chat with the Taliban political chief, who on Saturday signed a historic deal with Washington to withdraw foreign forces.

Since the signing in Doha however, the militants have ramped up violence against Afghan forces, ending a partial weeklong truce that provided a rare reprieve to war-weary residents.

US Forces-Afghanistan spokesman Sonny Leggett tweeted that the airstrike took place against Taliban fighters who were "actively attacking" an Afghan forces checkpoint in Helmand province.

He said insurgents had carried out 43 attacks on checkpoints in Helmand on Tuesday alone.

The insurgents killed at least 20 Afghan soldiers and policemen in a series of overnight attacks, government officials told AFP yesterday, casting a pall over peace talks between Kabul and the Taliban, due to begin on March 10.

Trump has touted the Doha deal as a way to end the bloody, 18-year US military presence in Afghanistan -- right in time for his November re-election bid.

Under the terms of the deal, US and other foreign forces will quit Afghanistan within 14 months, subject to Taliban security guarantees and a pledge by the insurgents to hold talks with the national government in Kabul.

The agreement also includes a commitment to exchange 5,000 Taliban prisoners held by the Afghan government in return for 1,000 captives -- something the militants have cited as a prerequisite for talks but which President Ashraf Ghani has refused to do before negotiations start.

Tornadoes kill 25 in Tennessee

Thousands lost power to their homes

AFP, Washington

Tornadoes ripped through Tennessee early Tuesday, leaving at least 25 people dead, destroying buildings and toppling power lines hours before the southern US state voted in Super Tuesday primaries.

Voting hours were extended due to the devastation the twisters wrought when they touched down shortly after midnight -- rubble was strewn across the state capital Nashville.

Residents ran for their lives as their homes came down around them. Tens of thousands lost power to their homes, officials said.

"TAKE COVER NOW! THIS IS AN EXTREMELY DANGEROUS STORM!!!" the National Weather Service tweeted as one tornado tore through an area west of Nashville.

Television broadcast showed cars piled up, hangars destroyed and what appeared to be dozens of aircraft smashed into each other at Nashville's John C. Tune Airport.

The Nashville Police Department circulated aerial photographs of many buildings missing roofs and homes destroyed -- standing next to houses that escaped damage.

"In the hours ahead, we will continue deploying search and rescue teams, opening shelters across the state, and sending emergency personnel to our communities hit hardest," Governor Bill Lee wrote on Twitter.



Damage is seen in an aerial picture after a tornado touched down in eastern Nashville, Tennessee, US, Tuesday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

J&K social media ban 'lifted'

India lifted some restrictions on internet access in Kashmir yesterday, including allowing access to social media websites for the first time since the restive Himalayan region was locked down and its autonomy revoked in August. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist government withdrew the special rights of Jammu and Kashmir -- then India's only Muslim majority state -- and split it into two federally administered territories last August, arguing the move was necessary to spur development. On Monday, in a government order reviewed by Reuters, authorities said only speed restrictions on mobile internet access would remain in place until mid-March.

Iran's first vice president 'infected with coronavirus'



The IranWire news site yesterday reported that Iran's first vice president Eshaq Jahangiri has tested positive for coronavirus and is undergoing treatment. IranWire cited an "informed source". There was no immediate confirmation from Iranian officials. Several Iranian officials have been infected with the coronavirus and one senior official died from a coronavirus infection on Monday. The Islamic republic reported 15 new deaths from COVID-19 and 586 additional cases, bringing the overall toll to 92 dead and 2,922 infected.

Virus fear prompts Italy to ban kisses, handshakes



Italy was set to urge people to stop greeting each other by kissing or shaking hands to limit the spread of the new coronavirus. Other measures to be approved by the government yesterday, briefed in advance to the media, include what promises to be an unpopular plan to play all football matches without fans. Italy has borne brunt in Europe of the new virus now spreading across the world faster than it is in the central Chinese region where it was first detected late last year. The Mediterranean country's 79 deaths have made Italy the world's third-most affected by number of fatalities after China and Iran. It has more than 2,500 cases in all and the COVID-19 disease caused by the virus appears to be spreading faster and wider by the day.

SOURCE: AFP

EU unveils 'climate law'

Makes 2050 net zero emission target legally binding; critics, including Thunberg, say move not enough

AFP, Brussels

Europe unveiled a landmark law yesterday to achieve "climate neutrality" by 2050, under the stern gaze of teenage activist Greta Thunberg who slammed it as meaningless.

The Swedish eco-warrior was in the Belgian capital for a Friday protest, but first attended a meeting of European commissioners, the top EU officials who will greenlight the draft law, that is rarely opened to outsiders.

Thunberg was also to appear before a European Parliament committee, a visit that has angered many MEPs who have been told to ban other visitors and key staff due to the coronavirus outbreak.

According to a leaked draft seen by AFP, the proposed climate text aims to enshrine into law the EU's grand ambition of zero net carbon emissions by mid-century.

It would give the EU executive new powers to impose emission targets on

member state governments, a simple measure welcomed by greens and activists.

"One of the added values is to get out of the current situation where climate objectives are taken



unanimously by the European Council" which brings together heads of state and government, said French liberal MEP Pascal Canfin.

But handing more power to the commission, the EU's executive arm, faces almost certain opposition from the national governments and the European Parliament which must ratify the proposal.

"Member states and parliament will hate it," said Quentin Genard of climate think tank E3G in a blog post. "Even the more pro-European and pro-climate action countries want to keep oversight over climate policies."

The goal of climate neutrality was approved by EU leaders at a rocky summit in June with coal-dependent Poland the only holdout.

It would bind the EU's 27 member states to balance polluting emissions and removals of greenhouse gases over the next thirty years.

But on Tuesday Thunberg said the widely leaked proposal does "absolutely nothing" for the climate emergency, in a joint letter with other young activists.

"Net zero emissions by 2050 for the EU equals surrender. It means giving up," the letter said.

"We don't just need goals for just 2030 or 2050. We, above all, need them for 2020 and every following month and year to come," it said.

Europe trampling on rights of refugees

Says Erdogan, demands EU help in Syria

AFP, Ankara

Turkey's president yesterday warned a fresh migrant crisis could be resolved only if Europe supports its efforts in Syria, as violent clashes broke out between refugees and police on the Greek border.

Thousands of migrants have massed at the Greek frontier with Turkey since President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced last week that they would no longer be prevented from trying to enter Europe.

Erdogan's move came after 34 Turkish troops were killed in northern Syria by Russian-backed Syrian forces, prompting him to seek greater assistance from the international community.

But EU leaders now fear a repeat of the migrant crisis of 2015-16, when more than one million migrants crossed into the EU, and have decried Turkish "blackmail".

With mounting tensions around the border crossing at Pazarkule, a Turkish official claimed one migrant was killed and five injured by live fire from the Greek side.

Athens strongly denied the claim, but an AFP photographer earlier saw a migrant shot in the leg -- it was not clear whether by a real or rubber bullet -- as a group of refugees tried to cut their way through fencing.

Speaking in Ankara, Erdogan said Europe must support Turkey's "political and humanitarian solutions in Syria" if it wants to resolve the situation.