

South Asia steps up preventive measures

Imposes curfews, border controls

REUTERS, Islamabad/Dhaka

Pakistan yesterday suspended all international flights for two weeks to limit the spread of coronavirus, as governments across densely populated South Asia ramped up their efforts to contain the virus.

Pakistani officials also asked people to self-quarantine for at least another 45 days as the country reported its third coronavirus death, with confirmed cases rising to 534.

Authorities in Bangladesh tightened border controls, while Sri Lankan police arrested more than two dozen people for violating a nationwide curfew.

The region, home to 1.9 billion people, appears to have been less badly affected than other parts of the world, but the rate of new infections in Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka has accelerated.

As a whole, the region has registered 869 coronavirus cases and seven deaths.

Indian Railways, which carries more than 30 million passengers every day, said some people who had tested positive for coronavirus had travelled by train -- forcing officials to track down fellow passengers. RD Bajpai, a spokesman for India's national railway system, urged people not to travel.

In the eastern Indian state of West Bengal, inmates at the largest jail launched a violent protest against authorities for banning visitors due to the virus.

India, the world's second most-populous country, also plans to halt all incoming international flights to help stem the number of cases, which passed 271 on Saturday.

In Sri Lanka, which has reported 72 confirmed cases, police arrested 30 people from various parts of the country for violating curfew, a police spokesman said, adding that the curfew has been imposed till Monday morning.



Slovakia's President Zuzana Caputova wearing a protective face mask walks to pose for a group photo with newly appointed members of the Slovak government during the cabinet's inauguration at Presidential Palace in Bratislava, Slovakia, yesterday.

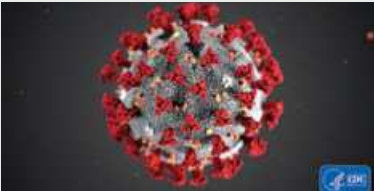
PHOTO: REUTERS

FACTORS BEHIND ITALY'S DISASTER

Loads of people have been wondering why the beautiful Mediterranean country has become the new epicentre of the coronavirus pandemic. Experts list a range of reasons -- from Italy's relatively high age to its strained healthcare system to some old fashioned bad luck -- that add up to a disaster not seen in generations. None of the answers alone explain why the nation of 60 million accounts for over a third of the nearly 11,500 deaths officially reported across the 7.7-billion strong world. But other countries will want to examine each of these factors and address them through various preventive measures in their bids to avoid becoming the next Italy.

OLD NATION: One of the first factors almost everyone who looks at the figures points to is Italians' average age. The median age of the overall population was 45.4 last year -- greater than anywhere else in Europe. It is also seven years higher than the median age in China and slightly above that of South Korea. Figures released Friday showed the age of Italians dying of COVID-19 averaging out at 78.5. Almost 99 percent of them were also suffering from at least one pre-existing condition or ailment. Italy's mortality rate among those infected with the virus is thus a relatively high 8.6 percent. Yet Japan's median age of 47.3 makes it an even older nation than Italy -- and it has just 35 officially registered deaths. So age is clearly not the only factor.

BAD LUCK: Some scientists think that it could really have been almost any other country after China. "I think the question of 'Why Italy?' is the most important question and it has a simple answer: No reason at all," Yascha Mounk of Johns Hopkins University told Canada's CBC television. "The only thing that makes Italy different is that the first couple of (locally-



transmitted) cases arrived in Italy about 10 days before they arrived in Germany, the United States or Canada." More than 4,000 people have died in Italy in the month since a 78-year-old builder from the Lombardy region of Milan became the first known European fatality of COVID-19. European nations such as Spain and France are now following Italy's trajectory and could theoretically have as many deaths and infections in a few weeks. "If other countries are not going to react in exactly the right way, they are going to become Italy," said Mounk.

SYSTEMIC COLLAPSE: The grim reality learned across Italy's devastated north is that diseases start spreading much faster once the healthcare system reaches its saturation point. Doctors have to start making life and death decisions about whom they help

first -- and why -- when they run out of equipment such as respirators and even beds. "Sometimes you have to weigh the chances of success against the patient's condition," Brescia hospital's emergency unit head Paolo Terragnoli told AFP this week. "We try to do our best for everyone, while doing an extra something for those who have better chances." Old and frail patients who are turned away are extremely contagious and -- tragically but realistically -- fated to die.

SCREENING AND COUNTING: The world has suddenly realised that it does not have enough test kits to screen for COVID-19. Nations such as Italy dealt with this problem by only testing those who already exhibited symptoms such as a fever and a dry cough. South Korea had the kits and the means to conduct more than 10,000 tests a day. Germany followed a similar model and its death rate began to drop once even the mild COVID-19 infections began being counted. This partially explains both why Italy's mortality rate is so high and why COVID-19 was contained faster in some other countries.

SOURCE: AFP

EFFORTS TO STOP LAYOFFS

UK to pay up to 80% of private workers' wages

REUTERS, London

Britain's government will pay a massive share of private sector wage bills to discourage bosses from firing staff as it resorts to war-time levels of borrowing to prop up the economy during its coronavirus shutdown.

"Today I can announce that for the first time in our history the government is going to step in and help to pay people's wages," finance minister Rishi Sunak said on Friday.

There was no limit on the size of the plan which the government will fund by selling more debt, as it will for other measures worth tens of billions of pounds rushed out over the past 10 days.

Sunak also allowed businesses to hold on to 30 billion pounds (\$35 billion) of value-added tax (VAT), which they would normally pass on to tax authorities. Moments earlier, Prime Minister Boris Johnson ordered the closure of pubs, restaurants, gyms and other businesses from Friday to slow the spread of the virus.

The centrepiece of Britain's coronavirus crisis plan is a new grant covering 80% of workers' salaries - up to a maximum of 2,500 pounds (\$2,930) a month each - if firms kept them on.

"The truth is we are already seeing job losses and there may be more to come," Sunak said. "I cannot promise you that no one will face hardship in the weeks ahead."

The package of measures rushed out by the government this month could push Britain's budget deficit back to 10% of gross domestic product, its peak after the global financial crisis, JP Morgan economist Allan Monks said.

Meanwhile, Ireland's government yesterday said it was also considering plans to pay up to 75% of the wages of thousands of staff temporarily laid off as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, the Irish Times reported.

US tests hypersonic missile

The United States announced Friday it has successfully tested an unarmed prototype of a hypersonic missile, a nuclear-capable weapon that could accelerate the arms race between superpowers. The Pentagon said a test glide vehicle flew at hypersonic speeds -- more than five times the speed of sound, or Mach 5 -- to a designated impact point. Hypersonic weapons can travel much faster than current nuclear-capable ballistic and cruise missiles at low altitudes, can switch direction in flight and do not follow a predictable arc like conventional missiles, making them much harder to track and intercept. In December, Russia declared it had placed into service its first Avangard hypersonic missile, which it claimed reached speeds of up to Mach 27, making it the first country to claim an operable hypersonic weapon. Last October China displayed its DF-17 hypersonic glide vehicle in its national day military parade.

Iran frees French national in prisoner swap

President Emmanuel Macron yesterday announced that Iran has freed a French researcher imprisoned in the Islamic republic after France released an Iranian threatened with extradition to the US. Macron "is happy to announce the release of Roland Marchal, imprisoned in Iran since June 2019" but he "urges the Iranian authorities to immediately free" Fariba Adelkhah, an anthropologist, his office said. France has for months demanded that Iran release Adelkhah and her partner Marchal, who were detained in June 2019, accused of plotting against national security. Iran has in recent months carried out prisoner exchanges with the US, Australia and Germany.



North Korea fires two 'ballistic missiles' into sea

North Korea fired what appeared to be two short-range ballistic missiles off its east coast yesterday, the latest in a series of such launches by Pyongyang as the world struggles with the coronavirus pandemic. The South Korean military condemned the launches as "extremely inappropriate given the difficult situation the world is experiencing due to COVID-19... We urge them to stop immediately." Pyongyang considers its military development necessary for security in the face of what it describes as American aggression. North Korea is under multiple sets of punishing sanctions over its nuclear and missile programmes.

SOURCE: AFP



An aurora is seen in the sky in Rovaniemi, Finland. Photo was taken on Friday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

US STOCK MARKET CRASH

Senators defend selling shares

REUTERS, Washington

Two Republican US senators defended themselves on Friday against heavy criticism, including calls that they resign, for selling large amounts of stock before the coronavirus-induced market meltdown and after closed-door briefings on the outbreak.

Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Richard Burr sold up to \$1.7 million worth of stock on Feb 13 in 33 separate transactions after offering public assurances the government was ready to battle the virus. His financial filings were first reported by ProPublica.

Burr receives regular classified briefings on threats to the United States. Burr said he relied only on public news reports to guide his decision on the Feb. 13 stock sales.

Senator Kelly Loeffler also sold \$3.1 million in shares in the weeks after lawmakers were first briefed on the virus, according to public filings. A report said the sales began after she participated in a private coronavirus briefing for senators.

Media reports about Burr and Loeffler, who have denied wrongdoing, prompted calls they leave office and other criticism from people as disparate as a progressive Democratic lawmaker and a conservative commentator. Trump said the senators should "possibly" be investigated.

'I think it's a smart decision' Californians heed 'stay-at-home' order

AFP, Los Angeles

Southern California residents on Friday appeared to heed calls to stay home as the most populous state in the US battles the coronavirus pandemic.

Along the Hollywood Walk of Fame, usually teeming with tourists taking pictures next to the "stars" that dot the avenue in the heart of Tinseltown, only a few people could be seen on the sidewalks -- many of them homeless.

The many souvenir and T-shirt shops that carry just about everything Hollywood were shuttered as was the famous TCL Chinese Theatre, giving an eerie feeling to the area.

The tourist buses which were still operating on Thursday -- though serving very few die-hard customers -- were also gone.

Elsewhere throughout Los Angeles, only restaurants serving take-out, pharmacies, and supermarkets remained open as people rushed to stock up on supplies.

At the Santa Monica Pier, another hot spot for tourists, a sign that read "Temporary Pier Closure,

Until Further Notice" greeted visitors.

Nearby at Venice Beach, the famed boardwalk usually crowded with visitors was mostly empty with only young skateboarders and some surfers in the water.

In other parts of the city, more than a dozen people interviewed said they were taking the lockdown order in their stride and planned to follow official advice to isolate and only go out for exercise, errands and essential jobs.

"I think it's a smart decision," said Nicole Sotolongo, 41, as she walked around her neighborhood of Los Feliz with her two small children.

"It's hard to slow down and to say I'm going to do something different... but a lot of it is kind of a mental game too and you got to stay positive."

Local authorities in northern California earlier this week had issued a stay-at-home order for several counties in the region but on Thursday, Governor Gavin Newsom extended the order statewide.



CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC LATEST DEVELOPMENTS

CHINA: NO DOMESTIC CASES

China reports no new local cases for a third consecutive day, but confirms the highest one-day tally yet in infections from abroad, with another 41 cases. China has 81,008 cases, including 3,255 fatalities and 71,740 people recovered.

MORE THAN 11,000 DEAD GLOBALLY

At least 11,737 deaths have been recorded since the virus first emerged in December, according to an AFP tally compiled at 1230 GMT on Saturday based on official sources. There have been more than 277,106 infections reported in 164 countries and territories. Italy has recorded 4,032 deaths out of 47,021 cases, with 5,129 recoveries. The worst affected countries after Italy and China are Iran with 1,556 deaths, Spain with 1,326 deaths, and France with 450 deaths.

900M PEOPLE CONFINED TO HOMES

An estimated 900 million people are now confined to their homes in 35 countries around the world -- including 600 million hemmed in by obligatory government lockdown orders -- according to an AFP tally. Colombia will impose obligatory confinement on Tuesday evening. The same will begin across Tunisia today. In the US, seven US states have issued orders to stay home -- California, New York, Illinois, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Connecticut and Nevada. In total, one in five people in the US are affected by stay-at-home orders.

YOUNG PEOPLE 'NOT INVINCIBLE'

While the elderly and those with pre-existing medical conditions are the hardest hit by the virus, WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus warned that young people were also vulnerable. "Today I have a message for young people: you are not invincible. This virus could put you in hospital for weeks -- or even kill you," Tedros said. "Even if you don't get sick, the choices you make about where you go could be the difference between life and death for someone else." The average age of those who died from Covid-19 in Italy was 78.5 years.

TOUGHENING MEASURES

Switzerland, which has so far not followed other countries in ordering full confinement, announces it will ban all gatherings of more than five people, and that anyone standing closer than two metres to others risks a fine. Haiti, Dominican Republic, Jordan and Burkina Faso introduce curfews. Cuba, which is largely dependent on its tourism revenue, will close its borders to non-residents on Tuesday, for 30 days. The Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso close their borders as of this weekend. Brazil will close its borders as of Monday to all visitors from Europe, Australia and several Asian countries.

HOMELESS TO BE HOUSED IN HOTELS

Hundreds of homeless people in London are being housed in hotels to self-isolate and give them "vital protection" from the coronavirus. Three hundred rooms have been made available in two hotels for the next 12 weeks, the mayor's office said in a statement. Figures from the mayor's office for last year showed some 1,100 people were sleeping rough on London's streets at night. The rough sleepers will be housed at two hotels belonging to the Intercontinental chain and will be transported to their accommodation by drivers of the black cabs, who have volunteered for the task.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

Singapore reports first deaths

REUTERS, Singapore

Singapore yesterday reported 47 new cases of coronavirus, which were mainly imported, taking the city-state's tally to 432 infections. Singapore also reported two virus-related deaths yesterday of people with underlying health conditions, marking the first fatalities in the city-state's widely praised battle against the infection.

India's Tamil Nadu shuts borders

AFP, Chennai

The Indian state of Tamil Nadu on Friday took the rare step of closing its borders with several neighbouring states because of the coronavirus pandemic. The Tamil Nadu government shut the borders with Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh states, which have reported a growing number of coronavirus cases. While India has virtually sealed its land borders with other countries, officials said they could not recall a state closing internal borders like this in recent decades.

Hong Kong reports rise in cases

REUTERS, Hong Kong

Hong Kong yesterday said a surge in imported cases of coronavirus would likely lead to a community outbreak and pile pressure on the city's already stretched healthcare system. The Chinese-ruled territory, with 273 confirmed cases of coronavirus and four deaths, is trying to contain a surge in cases as people return from overseas infected with the disease. Hong Kong has toughened curbs on travellers, ordering 14 days of quarantine for arrivals from midnight on Thursday and advising against all non-essential travel.