

S Lanka church 'forgives' Easter suicide bombers

Sri Lanka's Roman Catholic Church yesterday said it had forgiven the suicide bombers behind the attacks that killed at least 279 people last Easter. Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith told an Easter mass -- broadcast from a TV studio because of the coronavirus pandemic -- that "we offered love to the enemies who tried to destroy us". "We forgave them," he said, adding that instead of retaliating, the nation's Catholic minority had contemplated Jesus' message of hope, and reduced tensions. The April 21 Easter Sunday bombers targeted three churches and three luxury hotels, killing at least 279 people and wounding 593. Police have arrested 135 people in connection with the bombings, blamed on the National Thowheeth Jama'ath extremist group. 199 people have been infected with the virus in the country, with seven deaths.

Taliban to free 20 prisoners

The Taliban yesterday said it was set to release 20 prisoners in the southern Afghan city of Kandahar, in a potential breakthrough after the insurgents walked out of talks with the government last week. "Today, 20 prisoners of the Kabul administration will be released," Taliban spokesman Suhail Shaheen said on Twitter, adding that the group would be handed over to representatives of the Red Cross. The announcement follows a string of releases of Taliban prisoners by the Afghan government and came after the head of US and Nato forces in Afghanistan met with insurgent leaders to discuss a reduction in violence in the war-weary country. Washington signed a key deal with the Taliban in February that promised the withdrawal of US and foreign troops from Afghanistan by next summer, provided the militants start talks with Kabul and adhere to other guarantees.

Assange 'fathered two kids in Ecuador embassy'



WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange fathered two children with one of his lawyers while holed up in Ecuador's embassy in London for much of the past decade, a report yesterday said. The 48-year-old Australian is allegedly the dad of two boys -- aged two and one -- born to South African-born lawyer Stella Morris, the Mail on Sunday reported. The newspaper published the report alongside photographs of Assange with the toddlers and an interview with Morris who said they "fell in love" and were planning to marry. The couple have been engaged since 2017, according to the paper, which said it learned about the revelations in court papers seen last week. Assange is being held in London's high security Belmarsh prison as he fights an extradition request by the United States to stand trial there on espionage charges.

SOURCE: AFP



Healthcare workers (L) acknowledge applause from policemen outside the Gregorio Marañón Hospital in Madrid, Spain yesterday, during a national lockdown to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 disease.

PHOTO: AFP

'Death sentence' for other patients

AFP, New Delhi

Liver patient Shahjahan's family feared the worst when a New Delhi public hospital told her to leave because her bed was needed in a coronavirus unit.

The 40-year-old mother had been on a ventilator with an acute infection for almost two weeks when she left Lok Nayak hospital on Tuesday night.

She died at her family home in Delhi the next morning. Other hospitals had turned her away because of the pandemic.

"The authorities just left her to die. Even when they referred us to another hospital, they refused to give us an ambulance," said Mohammad Khalid, a relative of Shahjahan.

The capacity of medical facilities around the world has been stretched by the surge of COVID-19 patients as outbreaks worsen in many countries.

It can cause people with other life-threatening diseases to miss out on vital care -- especially in places like India, where healthcare systems are shakier.

Dozens of people with serious medical conditions are camped outside India's national medical institute in tents set up by the Delhi government. Many of them had travelled from



other cities for now-cancelled appointments and can't go back due to transport restrictions under the nationwide lockdown that began on March 25.

Outpatient departments at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) closed, forcing cancer patients and others with deadly ailments to take shelter in a grimy pedestrian subway and under canvas.

Though aid groups have provided some food and medicines, it had been 12 hours since Sury Das had eaten when AFP met him.

His son, who had mouth cancer, lay on a thin mattress with his face covered by a scarf. Flies hovered around him. Four days later, he died.

The AIIMS did not immediately respond to requests for comment on the death and the patients outside. But hospitals across the vast

country of 1.3 billion people have been put on alert and its virus death toll is now at 287.

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the lockdown, he gave millions of Indians taking life-saving drugs only four hours' notice.

Amulya Nidhi, a health activist based in Madhya Pradesh state, told AFP the government knew that vulnerable patients -- including those with silicosis and tuberculosis, which kills tens of thousands each year in India, as well as pregnant women -- were at risk.

"I'm getting distress calls from across India over access to basic medicines and treatment," said Nidhi.

"It is important to expand healthcare facilities to fight COVID-19. At the same time, hospitals and ambulances have to be available for patients with other problems," he said.

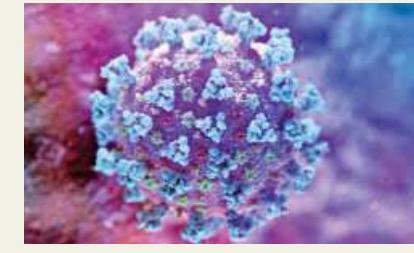
DEATHS RISE IN INDIA'S BIGGEST SLUM

Coronavirus cases in Mumbai's densely populated Dharavi slum -- one of Asia's biggest -- have risen to 43 including four deaths, officials said yesterday as they ramp up testing in a race to contain the spread of the illness.

India has been in a nationwide lockdown since March 25. India Saturday extended the lockdown for 2 more weeks.

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

LATEST UPDATES



US DEATHS TOP 20,000

At least 20,608 people in the United States have died, making the US the hardest-hit country. It also has the highest number of reported infections (530,006), according to the latest figures from Johns Hopkins University.

75,000 DEAD IN EUROPE

At least 109,300 people have died worldwide from the coronavirus in 193 countries and territories, according to an AFP tally around 1000 GMT yesterday based on official sources. There have been more than 1,780,640 million reported infections. With 75,011 deaths out of 909,700 diagnosed cases, Europe is the hardest-hit continent. Italy has 19,468 deaths, Spain 16,972, France 13,832 and Britain 9,875.

SPECTRE OF RECESSION

The World Bank warns South Asia is on course for its worst economic performance in 40 years, with decades of progress in the battle against poverty at risk. It slashes its growth forecast for the region this year to 1.8-2.8 percent from its pre-pandemic projection of 6.3 percent, with at least half the countries falling into "deep recession".

'EASTER OF SOLITUDE'

Pope Francis livestreams Easter Sunday mass to the world's 1.3 billion Catholics, from an empty Saint Paul's Cathedral at the Vatican. "For many, this is an Easter of solitude lived amid the sorrow and hardship that the pandemic is causing, from physical suffering to economic difficulties," the pope says. He calls for a reduction or forgiveness of poor nation's debts and an "immediate" ceasefire in global conflicts.

CONFINEMENT GOES ON

Lebanon extends its lockdown until April 26. Syria extends the closure of schools and universities until May 2. Argentina extends its obligatory confinement until April 26 in big cities, but considers relaxing the measures in rural areas.

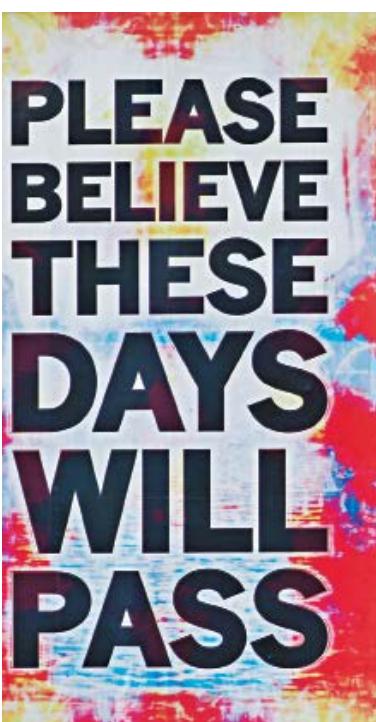
UK PM OUT OF HOSPITAL

Britain's virus-stricken Prime Minister Boris Johnson is discharged from hospital after spending three days in intensive care. Downing Street says that on the advice of his medical team, he will not immediately return to work.

SAUDI ARABIA EXTENDS CURFEW

Saudi Arabia's King Salman extended a nationwide curfew until further notice due to the spread of the new coronavirus after the kingdom reported more than 300 new infections on each of the last four days.

SOURCE: AFP



A woman runs past posters with messages in Manchester, Britain, yesterday, during a nationwide lockdown to prevent the spread of Covid-19 disease.

PHOTO: REUTERS

'I owe them my life'

Released from hospital, UK PM praises medics

AFP, London

Virus-stricken Prime Minister Boris Johnson yesterday admitted he owed his medical team his "life" as Britain braced to pass the grim milestone of 10,000 hospital deaths from COVID-19.

The country is now seeing death tolls to match Europe's hardest-hit nations Italy and Spain after recording nearly 1,000 daily fatalities in each of the last two days.

The actual figure, amid hopes of hitting a peak, may be far higher as the count does not include those who have died in care homes and the community.

Britain's tally of confirmed cases has climbed close to 80,000, but that is thought to be only a snapshot of the true level of infections due to limited testing for the virus.

Johnson, who spent three days in intensive care this week after contracting COVID-19, praised staff treating him in a state-run hospital.

"I can't thank them enough. I owe them my life," he said, in a first public statement since being moved out of intensive care at London's St Thomas' Hospital on Thursday.

The 55-year-old leader has since been making "very good progress" in his recovery and able to take short walks between periods of rest, according to Downing Street.

Johnson was discharged from hospital



yesterday, a Downing Street spokesman said.

The PM has been discharged from hospital to continue his recovery, at Chequers," the spokesman said, referring to the prime minister's country estate outside London.

"On the advice of his medical team, the PM will not be immediately returning to work."

It is also uncertain when Britain might be able to lift stringent social distancing measures rolled out on March 23. Implemented for an initial three weeks, the lockdown is set for a formal review next week and likely to remain in place until at least the end of the month.

Queen Elizabeth II urged Britons to keep staying home, in what is believed to be her first pre-recorded Easter address, released by Buckingham Palace on Saturday evening.

Record numbers of imported cases in China

Reuters, Shanghai

China is stepping up scrutiny of inbound foreigners and tightening border control after the number of single-day imported coronavirus cases set a record, helping double the daily number of newly detected infections.

New confirmed cases in mainland China reached 99 on April 11 from 46 the previous day, with all but two involving travellers from abroad.

In addition, highlighting another major source of risk, newly reported asymptomatic coronavirus cases nearly doubled to 63 on April 11, from 34 the previous day.

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