

New China virus cases drop for third day

Death toll reaches 1,665, while more than 68,000 have been infected; Taiwan records first fatality

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BEIJING

The number of new cases from China's COVID-19 epidemic dropped for a third consecutive day on Sunday, as the World Health Organisation chief warned it was "impossible" to predict how the outbreak would develop.

The death toll jumped to 1,665 in mainland China on Sunday after 142 more people died from the virus. More than 68,000 people have now been infected — but the number of new cases continued to decline.

In hardest-hit Hubei, the number of new cases slowed for a third consecutive day and at 139, the number of deaths was level with Saturday's toll. The number of new cases in other parts of the country has dropped for twelve straight days.

Mi Feng, National Health Commission spokesman, said the figures were a sign that China was controlling the outbreak. "The effects of epidemic prevention and control in various parts of the country can already be seen," he said.

But the WHO chief, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, has warned that it was "impossible to predict which direction this epidemic will



Returning home: Buses carrying American passengers from the quarantined cruise ship leaving a port in Yokohama, near Tokyo, on Monday. • AP

take". "We ask all governments, companies, and news organisations to work with us to sound the appropriate level of alarm without fanning the flames of hysteria," he said, speaking at the Munich Security Conference.

Taiwan reported its first death on Sunday, after a 61-year-old man with underlying health problems but no recent overseas travel history died in hospital on Saturday. It is the fifth recorded death outside mainland China — previous victims were in the Philippines, Hong Kong, Japan, and France.

The scale of the epidemic

ballooned on Thursday after authorities in Hubei changed their criteria for counting cases, retroactively adding 14,000 cases in a single day.

Movement restricted
Chinese authorities have placed some 56 million people in Hubei and its capital Wuhan under quarantine, virtually sealing off the province from the rest of the country in an unprecedented effort to contain the virus.

Even as China insisted the epidemic was under control, Hubei authorities announced on Sunday a tightening of movement across

the province. This includes broad instructions that residential compounds and villages are "sealed off" from unnecessary visitors, with tenants' outings "strictly managed", as well as recommending bulk purchases of daily necessities. All non-essential public spaces will also be closed, and residential areas and workplaces with confirmed cases should implement a 14-day quarantine.

Beijing's municipal government has enacted a rule requiring people coming to the capital to self-quarantine for 14 days, according to official media.

'40 Americans on ship have COVID-19'

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
WASHINGTON/YOKOHAMA

A senior U.S. health official said on Sunday that more than 40 Americans on a quarantined cruise ship in Japan have been infected with the deadly virus and would not be a part of an evacuation effort.

"They're going to be in hospitals in Japan," Anthony Fauci, a senior official at the National Institutes for Health said on a TV show. They are among the 400 Americans who began leaving the quarantined *Diamond Princess* late on Sunday night to board chartered flights home.

2 more Indians infected
The move came as the number of new COVID-19 cases diagnosed on the ship jumped by 70 to 355. Two more Indians have tested positive for the virus, taking the number to five. They have been sent to medical facilities for further treatment.

(With inputs from PTI)

Xi's early involvement in fight against virus raises questions

It opens him up to criticism why public was not alerted sooner

ASSOCIATED PRESS
BEIJING

A recent speech by Chinese President Xi Jinping that has been published by state media indicates for the first time that he was leading the response to a new virus outbreak from early on in the crisis.

The publication of the February 3 speech was an apparent attempt to demonstrate that the Communist Party leadership had acted decisively from the beginning, but also opens Mr. Xi up to criticism over why the public was not alerted sooner.

In the speech, Mr. Xi said he gave instructions on fighting the virus on January 7 and ordered the shutdown that began on January 23 of cities at the epicentre of the outbreak. His remarks were published by state media late on Saturday.

"On January 22, in light of the epidemic's rapid spread and the challenges of prevention and control, I made a clear request that Hubei province implement comprehensive and stringent controls over the outflow of people," Mr. Xi told a meet-



Xi Jinping

ing of the party's standing committee, its top body.

Too little, too late

The disclosure of his speech indicates that top leaders knew about the outbreak's potential severity weeks before such dangers were made known to the public. It was not until late January that officials said the virus can spread between humans and public alarm began to rise.

Zhang Lifan, a commentator in Beijing, said it's not clear why the speech was published now. One message could be that local authorities should take responsibility for failing to take effective measures after Mr. Xi gave instructions in early January. Alternatively, it may

mean that Mr. Xi, as the top leader, is willing to take responsibility because he was aware of the situation, Mr. Zhang said.

Trust in the government's approach to outbreaks remains fractured after the SARS epidemic of 2002 and 2003, which was covered up for months.

Authorities in Hubei and Wuhan faced public fury over their initial handling of the epidemic.

The anger reached a peak earlier this month following the death of Li Wenliang, a young doctor who was reprimanded by the local police for trying to spread a warning about the virus. He ended up dying of the disease himself.

In apparent response, the Communist Party's top officials in Hubei and Wuhan were dismissed and replaced last week.

Even as authorities have pledged transparency through the current outbreak, citizen journalists who challenged the official narrative with video reports from Wuhan have disappeared and are believed to be detained.

Multiple rockets hit U.S. coalition base in Baghdad

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BAGHDAD

Multiple rockets hit an Iraqi base hosting American troops near the U.S. Embassy early on Sunday, the latest in a flurry of attacks against U.S. assets in the country.

"The Coalition confirms small rockets impacted the Iraqi base hosting (coalition) troops in the International Zone... No casualties," said coalition spokesman Myles

Caggins. An Iraqi military statement said three Katyusha rockets had hit the fortified Green Zone which hosts the U.S. Embassy, other foreign missions and Iraqi government buildings.

A fourth rocket hit a logistics base in a different neighbourhood operated by the Hashed al-Shaabi, a military network officially incorporated into the Iraqi state, the Iraqi military said.

There was no immediate statement from the Hashed.

19th attack

Strikes on assets of both the U.S. and Hashed at the same time are unusual, as Washington has blamed hardline elements within the military network for repeated rocket attacks on American installations across Iraq.

Sunday's was the 19th attack since October to target

either the Embassy or the roughly 5,200 American troops stationed alongside local forces across Iraq. No group has claimed responsibility for any of the incidents. In December, a rocket attack on the northern Iraqi base of KI left one U.S. contractor dead and unleashed a dramatic series of events.

Washington responded with retaliatory strikes against Kataeb Hezbollah, a

hardline Hashed faction in western Iraq. Days later, an American drone strike in Baghdad killed top Iranian General Qasem Soleimani and his right-hand man, Hashed deputy chief Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.

Hashed factions have vowed revenge for the pair's death but said they would prioritise a political objective first: the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq.

Air strikes 'kill 31 civilians' in Yemen

REUTERS
DUBAI

Yemen's Iran-aligned Houthi movement accused the Saudi-led coalition of carrying out retaliatory air strikes on Saturday that killed at least 30 people, including civilians.

The United Nations office in Yemen said preliminary field reports indicated that "as many as 31 civilians were killed and 12 others injured

in strikes that hit Al-Hayjah area" in Al-Jawf province.

The Health Ministry in Houthi-controlled Al-Jawf province said women and children were among those killed, Houthi-run Al-Masirah TV reported. It followed a Houthi claim to have downed a coalition Tornado warplane in the area on Friday. But the Saudi-led coalition's spokesman Colonel Turki al-Malki said only that

a Tornado jet had crashed in Al-Jawf, Saudi state news agency (SPA) reported.

He later said that rescue operations had been launched and that the possibility of "collateral damages" has been reported, without providing more details.

Colonel Malki said the crew of two officers ejected from the plane before it crashed but the Houthis opened fire at them.

ELSEWHERE



Kim makes first public appearance in weeks

SEUL
Making his first reported public appearance in more than three weeks as a deadly epidemic rages in neighbouring China, North Korea's Kim Jong-un "paid high tribute" to his father Kim Jong Il on his birth anniversary on Sunday. The appearance is Mr. Kim's first in 22 days after he attended Lunar New Year festivities and then disappeared from the public eye. The COVID-19 outbreak in China has alarmed the North, prompting it to close its borders and suspend all flights and trains to and from its most important ally.

'Iran will never yield to U.S. pressure for talks'

Their methods will fail, says Rouhani

REUTERS
DUBAI

Iran will never hold talks with the U.S. under pressure, President Hassan Rouhani said on Sunday, adding that Tehran's help was essential in establishing security in West Asia.

Relations between Tehran and Washington reached crisis point in 2018 after U.S. President Donald Trump abandoned a 2015 pact between Iran and world powers under which Tehran accepted curbs to its nuclear programme in return for the lifting of sanctions. President Trump has adopted a policy of "maximum pressure" to force Tehran to negotiate a broad-

er deal that further curbs Iran's nuclear work, ends its missile programme and its involvement in regional proxy wars.

"We will never yield to America's pressure and we will not negotiate from a position of weakness," Mr. Rouhani said in a televised news conference.

"America's 'maximum pressure' towards Iran is doomed to fail... our enemy (the U.S.) is very well aware that their pressure is inefficient," he said.

Mr. Rouhani added: "Securing peace and stability in the sensitive region of West Asia and in the Persian Gulf is impossible without Iran's help."

Biden attacks rival Sanders' past vote on gun policies

Pledges to hold gun makers accountable

ASSOCIATED PRESS
LAS VEGAS

Joe Biden, standing on a Las Vegas stage roughly 1,000 feet from the scene of the deadliest mass shooting in modern U.S. history, took on White House rival Bernie Sanders for his past vote to exempt gun manufacturers from liability for shootings.

The former Vice-President devoted the majority of his Saturday night speech at a Democratic gala on the Las Vegas Strip to deliver a fiery charge against the National Rifle Association and gun manufacturers, vowing to



Joe Biden

hold gun makers accountable if elected President.

"When I'm the president, we'll take them on, remove the immunity and allow those parents who are trying now to sue for the pain and mayhem they have caused," Mr. Biden said.

Mr. Biden, after decrying "carnage in our streets" and the anguish of families

whose loved ones were killed in gun violence, said he "will not rest until they're able to sue the gun manufacturers and get a ban on assault weapons".

Mr. Biden didn't cite Mr. Sanders by name when referring to a 2005 Federal law that shields gun makers from liability in most crimes, but said, "some of the people running for office voted for that exemption".

"Ladies and gentlemen that immunity was granted. Granted. And it was a horrible, horrible decision," he said.

Mr. Sanders has since changed his position, co-sponsoring legislation to repeal the protections for gun manufacturers.

Reconsider ban on Army chief, Sri Lanka tells U.S.

'Action unnecessarily complicates ties'

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
COLOMBO

Sri Lanka on Sunday said the U.S. should reconsider its decision to refuse entry to the island's Army chief over his alleged war crimes and warned that relations were being "unnecessarily complicated".

The U.S. on Friday said the travel ban on Lieutenant General Shavendra Silva and his family was imposed over what it called credible evidence of human rights violations in the 2009 finale to the civil war.

U.S. Ambassador Alaina Teplitz was summoned by Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister Dinesh Gunawardena on Sunday, officials said.

He said Colombo was "disappointed" with the decision, the first against a Sri Lankan military officer.

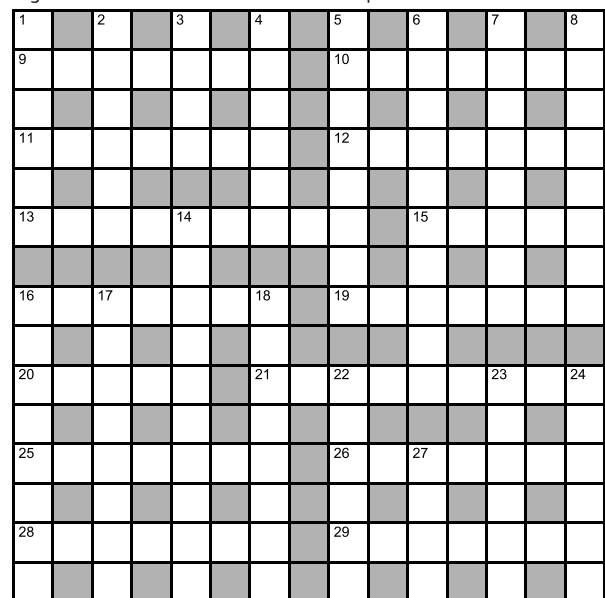
"The Minister said this action unnecessarily complicates the U.S.-Sri Lanka relationship," his office said in a statement shortly after the closed-door meeting.

Mr. Silva was unfairly barred on unverified allegations, Mr. Gunawardena added.

The Foreign Ministry quoted Mr. Teplitz as saying the U.S. would continue its cooperation with Sri Lanka, including in defence, despite the ban on Lt. Gen. Silva. There was no immediate comment from Mr. Teplitz or the U.S. Embassy.

THE HINDU CROSSWORD 12860

Log on to crossword.thehindu.com for more puzzles



(set by Arden)

- 15 Testing time for kids — Terminator bombed airport terminal (5)
- 16 Late to cover study, you can go no further (4,3)
- 19 American upset with scrambled eggs and tea — it's prompt (7)
- 20 Long, maybe nearly fifty gone (5)
- 21 Redemption — meant to modulate and check voice (9)
- 25 Long time spent in line like an animal (7)
- 26 Case of cockney demand for some bling (7)
- 28 Food complaint, two characters flipped inside (7)
- 29 Melissa used for earthmoving activity (7)
- 4 Party by the hour, no universal support (6)
- 5 Sit out among doctors, shows respect (8)
- 6 A beautiful fish, less than right in a way (5,5)
- 7 Fake news? True, she does provide nourishment initially (3,5)
- 8 Risk taking people, by law get a handcuff (8)
- 14 Placing reliance on a mode of transport (5,5)
- 16 Air filter for chemical wash (8)
- 17 A defence pact faces trouble over Asia Minor (8)
- 18 Face oddly excites tongues (8)
- 22 Some are embarrassed on being hauled up to port (6)
- 23 New meaning, not new puzzle (6)
- 24 Switch to Google — loves to go (6)
- 27 Scotch during regular reunions (4)

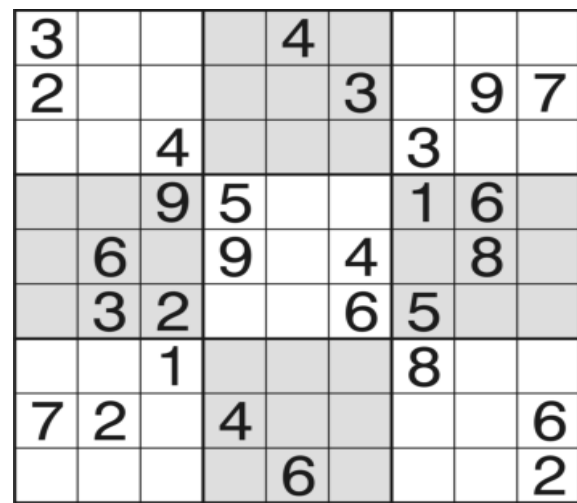
ACROSS

- 9 Maybe bad sign — it takes guts (7)
- 10 Sam, perhaps on a roll initially, can't make out (7)
- 11 Each adopted the wild cat (7)
- 12 Big bird with a nice clipped tail (7)
- 13 Rain on grass, odd rain creates a hotchpotch (9)

DOWN

- 1 Crazy plan to get an aide (6)
- 2 Start with one diamond opening (6)
- 3 Novel must be fifth (4)

SUDOKU



DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★☆☆☆

Solution to puzzle 12859

G	O	D	O	W	N	C	A	U	S	E	W	A	Y
I	M	P	A	R	T	R	E	T	R	E	N	C	H
S	A	E	K	T	H	U	O						
G	R	A	V	I	T	A	S	S	N	O	O	Z	E
O	V	I	N	R	A	K	I	N	H				
F	R	E	I	G	H	T	T	R	A	I	N		
F	D	T	O	B	N	S	P						
S	A	E	K	T	H	U	O						
C	E	L	E	B	S	B	E	W	I	L	D	E	R
A	U	E	S	R	O	Y	O						
R	U	M	I	N	A	T	E	P	L	Y	I	N	G
A	N	C	A	T	E								
B	L	I	G	H	T	E	D	S	T	O	G	I	E

Solution to yesterday's Sudoku

9	4	8	7	3	1	6	5	2
5	3	2	4	6	8	9	7	1
7	6	1	2	9	5	8	3	4
4	8	3	5	2	9	1	6	7
1	5	9	6	7	4	3	2	8
2	7	6	1	8	3	5	4	9
8	9	4	3	5	2	7	1	6
3	1	7	9	4	6	2	8	5
6	2	5	8	1	7	4	9	3

