

Spain reports record 849 deaths in a day

The spike in COVID-19 toll has dampened hopes that the country crossed the peak of the crisis

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
MADRID

Once again, Spain hit a new record with 849 COVID-19 deaths in 24 hours on Tuesday although health chiefs said the rate of new infections was continuing its downward trend.

After Italy, Spain has suffered the world's second most deadly outbreak, which has now claimed 8,189 lives there. The latest figures came a day after the death toll fell slightly, dampening hopes it could have passed the peak of the crisis.



Day of mourning: Turin Mayor Chiara Appendino, left, stands at attention as an elderly woman walks past during a minute of silence on Tuesday. •AFP

COVID-19

Over the same period, the number of confirmed cases rose to 94,417 after another 9,222 people tested positive: a nearly 11% increase.

That figure was seen as a setback after a week, in which the rate had been steadily falling, with Monday's figures having shown a rise of just over 8%.

"It's true that today we have a slight increase in the number of cases," said Maria Jose Sierra, from the health ministry's emergencies coordination unit. But the downward trend "is continuing", she added.

This time last week, the rate of new infections stood

at around 20%

Now on day 18 of an unprecedented four-week national lockdown to slow the spread of the virus, Spain has sought to dramatically ramp up testing. It is sourcing kits from around the world in order to test some 50,000 people per day, up

from the current 20,000.

Meanwhile, Italy marked a minute of silence and flew flags at half mast on Tuesday to mourn the 11,591 people who have died.

The death toll in Italy has climbed by 837 to 12,428, the Civil Protection Agency has said.

Doctor who met Putin tests positive

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
MOSCOW

Denis Protsenko, the head of Moscow's main coronavirus hospital who met with President Vladimir Putin a week ago has tested positive, he said on Tuesday, as the Kremlin said the Russian leader's health was fine.

12-year-old dies in Belgium

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BRUSSELS

A 12-year-old girl infected with COVID-19 has died in Belgium, health officials said on Tuesday. Fatality at such a young age "is a very rare occurrence," said government spokesman Dr Emmanuel Andre,

U.S. death toll crosses 3,500

The Navy's 1,000-bed USNS Comfort arrived in New York

ASSOCIATED PRESS
AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
WASHINGTON

The U.S. death toll from COVID-19 climbed past 3,500 on Tuesday, eclipsing China's official count.

New York was the nation's deadliest hot spot, with about 1,550 deaths statewide, the majority of them in New York City.

President Donald Trump has been criticised for an initially slow response by the federal government to the now-accelerating pandemic spread. USNS Comfort, a Navy hospital ship with 1,000 beds that docked in New York on Monday, was expected to begin accepting non-coronavirus patients on Tuesday.

A 1,000-bed emergency hospital set up at the Javits Convention Center began taking patients Monday night. And the Billie Jean King USTA National Tennis Center was being transformed into a hospital.

The crisis became perso-



Comfort by the sea: The Navy's 1,000-bed USNS Comfort on its way to dock in New York. •AP

nal for New York Governor Andrew Cuomo with word that his brother was infected. Chris Cuomo tweeted that he suffered fever, chills and shortness of breath but will continue broadcasting from his basement.

Seeking help

On Monday, the Governor pleaded for help from volunteer medical workers, and close to 80,000 former nurses, doctors and other professionals were already said to be stepping forward.

New York City sought to bring in 250 out-of-town ambulances and 500 paramedics and emergency medical technicians to help its swamped EMS system. The city's ambulances are responding to about 6,000 calls a day, or 50% more than average, authorities said. Fire Commissioner Daniel Nigro said a five-day stretch last week was the busiest in the history of the city's EMS operation. Mr. Trump said U.S. death rate was likely to increase for two weeks.

Iran reports 141 deaths, raising total to 2,898

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
TEHRAN

Iran said on Tuesday 141 more people have died from the novel coronavirus, raising the official toll in one of the world's worst-affected countries to 2,898.

Health ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour said 3,111 new infections have been confirmed over the past 24 hours, bringing the total to 44,606.

He said 3,703 of those hospitalised are in a critical condition and 14,656 have recovered.

Iran has been scrambling to contain the COVID-19 outbreak since it reported its first cases on February 19.

After weeks of refraining from imposing a lockdown or quarantine measures, Tehran decided last Wed-

nesday to ban all intercity travel until at least April 8. The government has repeatedly urged Iranians to stay at home.

President Hassan Rouhani renewed those warnings on Tuesday as the climax of the two-week Persian New Year holiday nears.

He said authorities would close parks across the country on Wednesday, in a move that effectively blocks the family picnics that traditionally mark the 13th day of holiday. Mr. Rouhani called on people to "leave this tradition for some other time" and said violators would be fined.

The authorities have also stopped the print editions of all Iranian media until at least April 8, state news agency IRNA reported.

Indonesia declares state of emergency

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
JAKARTA

Indonesia on Tuesday declared a state of emergency as COVID-19 deaths in the world's fourth most populous country jumped again.

However, he has resisted calls for a nationwide lockdown.

President Joko Widodo has been heavily criticised for not imposing lockdowns in major cities, including the capital Jakarta, home to about 30 million people. He announced \$1.5 billion in beefed-up social assistance and subsidies for low-income workers.

On Tuesday, 136 people died after contracting the virus, with 1,528 confirmed cases of infection.

Study shows middle-age COVID-19 mortality risk

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
PARIS

Middle-aged people, and not just the elderly, have a dramatically higher risk of dying or developing serious illness from COVID-19, says a study published in *The Lancet Infectious Diseases* journal. Researchers from Britain analysed more than 3,600 confirmed COVID-19 cases as well as data from hundreds of passengers repatriated from Wuhan.

They found that age was a key determining factor in serious infections, with nearly one in five over-80s requiring hospitalisation, compared to around 1% among people under 30.

Taking into account estimates of the number of cases that may not have been clinically confirmed - that

is, mild or asymptomatic infections - the data showed the hospitalisation rate of patients in their fifties was 8.2%.

It estimated that the mortality rate from confirmed cases in China was 1.38%.

The *Lancet* study showed that 18.4% of patients in their 80s were hospitalised in China. This compared to 4.3% for 40 to 49-year-olds and roughly 1% for people in their 20s.

"There might be outlying cases that get a lot of media attention, but our analysis very clearly shows that at aged 50 and over, hospitalisation is much more likely than in those under 50, and a greater proportion of cases are likely to be fatal," said Azra Ghani, a co-author of the study.

China focuses on patients with no symptoms as infections rise

Asymptomatic people under observation numbered 1,541

REUTERS
SHANGHAI/BEIJING

China will start releasing information from Wednesday on coronavirus patients who show no disease symptoms, ordering them into quarantine for 14 days, a health official said, after the mainland witnessed its first rise in infections in five days.

As local infections peter out and new cases surface among travellers returning home, the existence of virus carriers with no symptoms is fuelling public concern that people could be spreading it without knowing they are ill.

From April 1, the daily report of the National Health

Commission will include details of such cases for the first time, Chang Jile, a commission official, told a briefing. People in close contact with them face 14 days of medical observation.

Asymptomatic patients under observation numbered 1,541 by Monday, with 205 of the cases having come from overseas, the Commission said separately.

Monday's 48 new infections, and one death, in mainland China were up from 31 the previous day, the commission said, reversing four days of declines. All were imported, taking China's tally of such cases to 771, with no new local infection

reported. Many were students returning from overseas. About 35 infected Chinese citizens are still studying abroad, Education Ministry official Liu Jin said.

Fearing a second wave of infections sparked by such inbound travellers, China will delay its college entrance exam by a month, until July 7 and 8, China Central Television said, although Hubei province, where the virus emerged late last year, and Beijing, the capital, will get more leeway in scheduling it.

The annual two-day "gao-kao" test drew more than 10 million candidates last year, state media have said.

Harry and Meghan formally bid farewell to royal life

He will remain a Prince but without any military appointments

REUTERS
LONDON

Prince Harry and wife Meghan posted their last message as working members of Britain's royal family on Monday before officially embarking on new careers without their "Royal Highness" styles.

The couple shocked Queen Elizabeth and the other Windsors in January by announcing plans to step back from their royal roles. A later deal brokered by the 93-year-old monarch means they will go their own way from April.

So from Wednesday, the couple, the Duke and Du-



Prince Harry and Meghan at Westminster Abbey in London on March 9. •AP

chess of Sussex, will be free to pursue new careers, earn their own money and spend most of their time in North America.

But they will no longer be able to use the word "royal" in their branding or carry out official duties and have agreed not to use the style of HRH - His or Her Royal Highness.

Harry, 35, the Queen's grandson and sixth in line to the throne, will remain a Prince but relinquish his military appointments.

"While you may not see us here, the work continues," the couple said in the last message on their sussexroyal Instagram page.

The pair, along with their son Archie, relocated to California from Canada earlier this month.

Myanmar scribe hit with terror charges

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
MANDALAY

A Myanmar journalist faces up to life in prison for publishing an interview with a rebel group operating in the country's restive Rakhine state a week after the insurgents were classified as a terrorist organisation.

A March 27 interview with a top representative of Arakan Army, a group seeking greater autonomy for Rakhine people, published by Voice of Myanmar led to the detention of editor-in-chief Nay Myo Lin, who was brought to court on terrorism charges on Tuesday. The government had classified the insurgents as a "terrorist group".

U.S. outlines plan for transition in Venezuela, sanctions relief

Power-sharing govt. to include allies of Maduro and Guaido

ASSOCIATED PRESS
MIAMI

The U.S. is prepared to lift sanctions on Venezuela in support of a new proposal to form a transitional government representing allies of both Nicolas Maduro and opposition leader Juan Guaido, officials said.

The plan, which will be presented on Tuesday by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, echoes a proposal made over the weekend by Mr. Guaido that shows how growing concerns about the coronavirus, which threatens to overwhelm the South American country's already collapsed health system and

crippled economy, are reviving U.S. attempts to pull the military apart from Mr. Maduro.

What's being dubbed the "Democratic Framework for Venezuela" would require Mr. Maduro and Mr. Guaido to step aside and hand power to a five-member Council of State to govern the country until presidential and parliamentary elections can be held in late 2020, according to a written summary of the proposal.

The plan also outlines for the first time U.S. requirements for lifting sanctions against Mr. Maduro, officials and the oil industry.

Those accused of grave human rights abuses and drug trafficking are not eligible for sanctions relief.

But for sanctions to vanish, U.S. Special Representative for Venezuela Elliott Abrams said the council would need to be functioning and all foreign military forces - from Cuba or Russia - would need to leave the country.

Still, any deal is unlikely to win Mr. Maduro's support unless the issue of his future is addressed and he's protected from the U.S. justice system, said David Smilde, a senior fellow at the Washington Office on Latin America.

ELSEWHERE



19 people killed in forest fire in China

Nineteen people have died while fighting a raging forest fire in Sichuan province and hundreds of reinforcements were sent to fight the blaze and evacuate nearby residents, state media reported on Tuesday. •AP

Pakistani journalist exiled in Sweden missing

Pakistani journalist Sajid Hussain, who was in exile in Sweden, has been missing for nearly a month, stoking fears that his disappearance is tied to his reporting on Balochistan, a press rights group said on Tuesday. •AFP

China chases Indonesia's fishing fleets, staking claim to sea's riches

Fishers in Natuna islands say they feel vulnerable with Beijing's presence in South China Sea becoming more aggressive

HANNAH BEECH
MUKTITA SUHARTONO
NATUNA ISLANDS

Dedi knows where the fish run strongest in Indonesian waters off the Natuna islands. The Chinese know, too. Backed by Chinese coast guard ships, Chinese fishing fleets have been raiding the rich waters of the South China Sea that are internationally recognised as exclusively Indonesia's to fish.

While Mr. Dedi catches the traditional way, with nets and lines, the steel Chinese trawlers scrape the bottom of the sea, destroying other marine life. So not only does the Chinese trawling breach maritime borders, it also leaves a lifeless seascape in its wake.

"They come into our wa-



Troubled waters: A Vietnamese boat that was sunk after caught fishing in Indonesia's Natuna Islands on Monday. •NYT

ters and kill everything," said Mr. Dedi, who like many Indonesians goes by a single name. "I don't understand why our government doesn't protect us."

Wary of offending its lar-

gest trading partner, Indonesian officials have played down incursions by Chinese fishing boats. But with the Chinese presence growing more aggressive, fishers in the Natunas are feeling vul-

nerable. "There was a vacant period, then China came back," said Ngesti Yuni Suprapti, the Deputy Regent of the Natuna archipelago.

Global ambitions

The latest episode occurred in February, fishers said, when Chinese boats flanked by coast guard vessels dropped their trawl nets yet again. It seemed as if the coronavirus outbreak peaking in China at the time hadn't diminished the country's global ambitions.

The Indonesian Fisheries Ministry, however, denied any intrusion by the Chinese.

China's illegal fishing near the Natunas carries global consequence, reminding regional governments of Beijing's expanding claims to a

waterway through which one-third of the world's maritime trade flows. But local leaders in the Natunas don't control what happens near their shores.

Chinese impunity was on full display in January when President Joko Widodo of Indonesia visited the Natunas. "There is no bargaining when it comes to our sovereignty," Mr. Joko said. Earlier, Indonesian fighter jets buzzed the sky, while warships patrolled the seas.

But the day after Mr. Joko left the Natunas, the Chinese showed up again. Its fishing fleet, backed by the coast guard, took days to leave the area, local officials and fishers said.

The Fisheries Ministry denied that any such incident

had taken place.

"Little by little, I think the Chinese will take the Indonesian sea, the Philippine Sea, the Vietnamese sea," said Wandarmar, a fisherman in the Natunas. "They are hungry: oil, natural gas, and lots and lots of fish."

The Chinese fishers are helping feed the country's growing appetite for seafood by trawling the South China Sea.

But they are also serving a broader purpose.

"Beijing wants Chinese fishers to operate here," said Ryan Martinson, an assistant professor at the China Maritime Studies Institute at the U.S. Naval War College, "because their presence helps to embody China's maritime claims." •NY TIMES

Taliban team in Kabul to monitor prisoner release

First such visit since its ouster in 2001

ASSOCIATED PRESS
KABUL

A three-member Taliban technical team arrived on Tuesday in the Afghan capital to monitor the release of their prisoners as part of a peace deal signed by the Taliban and the U.S., a spokesman for the insurgent group said.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid confirmed the team's arrival in a tweet. It marked the first time a Taliban delegation has been in Kabul since the group was driven out by the U.S.-led coalition in November 2001.

On Monday, Jawed Faisal, spokesman for the Afghan National Security Adviser's office, said Afghan officials and the Taliban agreed dur-

ing a video conference that the insurgent group should send a technical team to Kabul for discussions on the release of Taliban prisoners. The International Committee of the Red Cross agreed to assist the team in getting to Kabul.

The prisoner release is part of a peace deal signed last month by the Taliban and U.S. that calls for the government's release of 5,000 Taliban and the Taliban's release of 1,000 government personnel and Afghan troops. The peace deal calls for the eventual withdrawal of all 13,000 U.S. soldiers from Afghanistan in exchange for guarantees from the Taliban that they will fight other militant groups