

Spain emerges as new virus hotspot

Country sees more than 1,500 new infections in 24 hours as more nations close borders

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
PARIS

Governments around the world ramped up the battle against the SARS-CoV-2 virus on Saturday by shutting borders and promising cash injections, as Spain emerged as a global hotspot registering more than 1,500 new infections in just 24 hours. Further, the number of cases worldwide passed 1,500,000, according to an AFP tally compiled from official sources.

U.S. President Donald Trump on Friday declared a national emergency and announced a \$50 billion package, with similar measures being taken by governments from Austria to Canada on Saturday. The President's 30-day ban on travellers from Europe also came into effect on Saturday.

European nations, meanwhile, ramped up border controls on Saturday, with foreigners forbidden from crossing into Russia from Norway and Poland. Denmark and the Czech Repu-



Back to normal: Passengers getting off from a boat after crossing the Yangtze river to Jiangzhou township in Jiujiang, Jiangxi province, central China, on Saturday. •AFP

tions on Saturday and most of the country's more than 80,000 confirmed patients have already recovered. Attention instead has shifted to Spain, which has more than 5,750 cases, and Italy with more than 17,000.

Travel ban in U.K.

Britain has resisted imposing any wide restrictions, but the media reported on Saturday that a ban on large gatherings would come into force from next weekend.

On Saturday, the Philippines introduced a nighttime curfew in Manila, Saudi Arabia became the latest country to ban international flights and New Zealand said international travellers would have to self-isolate on arrival.

South Africa, meanwhile, has become the first sub-Saharan country to repatriate citizens from China - 146 South Africans who were working and studying in Wuhan city arriving back in their homeland on Saturday.

Trump gets tested for virus

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
WASHINGTON

U.S. President Donald Trump said on Saturday that he had taken a test for the virus, as the White House began protectively checking the temperature of anyone coming into close contact with him or Vice-President Mike Pence.

Appearing at a news conference where he attempted

again to provide guidance and assurance to worried Americans, Mr. Trump said he was yet to receive the results. The White House announced earlier in the day that "out of an abundance of caution, temperature checks are now being performed on any individuals who are in close contact with the President and Vice-President."

House passes aid Bill

ASSOCIATED PRESS
WASHINGTON

The U.S. House of Representatives approved legislation early on Saturday to provide direct relief to Americans suffering physically, financially and emotionally from the COVID-19 pandemic.

President Donald Trump on Friday declared the outbreak a national emergency,

freeing up money and resources to fight it.

As the House prepared to vote late on Friday, Speaker Nancy Pelosi trumpeted the hard-fought package that will provide free testing, sick pay for workers, enhanced unemployment benefits and bolstered food programmes for everyone in the United States.

COVID-19 outbreak poses new challenges to India's U.S. policy

Trump, whom India is betting on, left politically weakened

VARGHESE K. GEORGE

The outbreak of COVID-19 across the U.S., taking the administration of President Donald Trump by complete surprise, could inflict the ongoing campaign for the presidential election scheduled for November. This could also have an impact on India-U.S. ties, if the crisis cuts short the Trump presidency to a single term.

The crisis has put the focus sharply on issues that animate politics in the U.S. It has exposed the vulnerabilities of the country's health-care system that is dependent on its profiteering private sector; its extremely ruthless employment conditions that make it difficult for people to take sick leave; and a wider range of questions regarding the globally distributed manufacturing models that undercut American workers.

How deeply susceptible is the superpower to unpredictable global events beyond its control, and how the country's political and economic model might exacerbate this weakness have been part of America's public discourse through the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and the 2008 financial crisis. The current public health crisis could influence the debate further.

One has to see how this alters the complexion of the Democratic primary contest between Bernie Sanders and Joe Biden, and the winner's face-off with Mr. Trump in November. Mr. Trump and Mr. Sanders offer two distinctively different critiques of globalisation - the former wants a mercantilist global order, while the latter advo-



Democratic presidential candidates, Senator Bernie Sanders and former Vice-President Joe Biden, at a debate in Charleston, South Carolina, in February. •AP

cate a dismantling of the trade system that exploits American workers and wants the creation of a social security system. Mr. Biden is the torch-bearer of the neo-liberal global order.

Lack of grip

Mr. Trump appeared invincible until a fortnight ago as the economy was looking up and the stock market was on a sustained upward climb. His approval ratings were high. After the public display of his lack of grip over administrative matters, and the stock market thrown into a tail spin, the President's characteristic ability to blow his own trumpet is now merely jarring. Trump loyalists have figured that the virus is politically life-threatening for them, and have already launched their response - targeting China and topping up their nationalist rhetoric.

Mr. Biden has raced far ahead of Mr. Sanders by unifying establishment Democrats, but the latter will certainly repackage his democratic socialism against the backdrop of the current crisis and give a final push for his candidacy. Either of them will be a credible challenge to Mr. Trump.

If a Democrat wins the White House, India's U.S. policy, which is now riding on the presumption of Mr. Trump's invincibility, will be thrown into disarray as much as his rise did in 2016.

The two Democrats in the field have widely diverging viewpoints about the world order, but both share a distaste for India's Hindutva nationalism. If it is Mr. Biden who wins the nomination, he will have to accommodate a substantial part of Mr. Sanders's platform ahead of the general election.

The Indian government's unsophisticated confrontation with the Democrats and the carping of U.S.-based Hindutva groups against them could come back to bite in the event of a change of guard in the White House.

In any case, teetering on the brink of senility, Mr. Biden as President will merely echo the Democratic playbook on South Asia, human rights and communalism in India.

The virus has put Mr. Trump's re-election plans on ventilator. If he does not survive, India will pay for its decision of aligning with Mr. Trump with a period in the isolation ward.

COVID-19

blic also announced stringent restrictions.

Squares and streets from Milan to Madrid were deserted on Saturday as government calls to stay at home were heeded by most - some Italians took to singing to each other from their windows to beat the social isolation, others organised rounds of applause.

The World Health Organization (WHO) confirmed Europe as the epicentre of the pandemic on Friday after a dramatic slump in new cases in China, where the virus first emerged in December last year. China registered just a handful of new infec-

ELSEWHERE



No change to Olympics schedule, says Abe

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on Saturday resisted pressure for changes to the Tokyo Olympics schedule even as sporting events worldwide fall victim to the COVID-19 pandemic. Mr. Abe pledged Japan would host the Games as planned in July and said he had no immediate intention to declare a state of emergency. Organisers, Japanese government officials and the IOC have insisted preparations are on track and there will be no postponement or cancellation. •AFP

Rocket attacks on Iraq base wound soldiers

Katyusha hosts troops of coalition

REUTERS
BAGHDAD

Several Iraqi air defence servicemen were critically wounded on Saturday as multiple rockets hit a military base which houses U.S.-led coalition troops, in the second such strike in a week, the Iraqi military said. The U.S.-led coalition said three of its troops and two Iraqi soldiers were wounded in the attack.

Iraq's Joint Operations Command said 33 Katyusha rockets were launched near a section of the Taji base which houses coalition troops. It said the military found seven rocket launchers and 24 unused rockets in the nearby Abu Izam area. The military said it would

arrest those responsible. No group has claimed responsibility for the attack which, unlike recent similar attacks, took place in daylight hours.

A similar rocket attack on Wednesday on Taji, 20 km north of Baghdad, killed two U.S. troops and a British soldier, prompting Washington to launch retaliatory air strikes on Thursday which killed six Iraqis.

The United States blamed the Iran-backed Kataib Hezbollah Iraqi militia for Wednesday's attack and said its air strikes targeted the group. But the official Iraqi casualty figures showed three Iraqi soldiers, two policemen, one civilian and no militiamen were killed.

Abducted couple found alive in Mali

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BAMAKO

A Canadian woman and her Italian partner kidnapped in Burkina Faso in 2018 have been found alive in the northwest of Mali by UN peacekeepers, diplomatic and UN sources said on Saturday. "UN blue helmets found an Italian citizen and a Canadian citizen near Kidal, who had been taken hostage in Burkina territory in 2018," said a security official from the UN mission in Mali.

A UN source said the pair arrived at an airport in Mali's capital Bamako around midday on Saturday. A diplomatic source had earlier named the two people as Edith Blais and Luca Tacchetto.

A year later, New Zealand Muslims still feel unsafe

Rhetoric of hate is on the rise again, say community members in Christchurch

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
CHRISTCHURCH

Aliya Danzeisen rises before dawn every day to hear the news so she can prepare her school-age daughters for any harassment they may face for being Muslim.

"We don't feel any safer," the Muslim community leader says, reflecting on the 12 months since the Christchurch mosque attacks, in which a self-declared white supremacist killed 51 Muslims at Friday prayers.

The abuse experienced prior to the attacks on March 15 last year died down immediately after the killings, Ms. Danzeisen said, adding: "It felt the entire New Zealand population was rallying behind us." But she says it is now on the rise again, a year on from the killings. Prime



A woman smiles after laying flowers at the entrance to the Al-Noor mosque on Saturday in Christchurch. •GETTY IMAGES

Minister Jacinda Ardern - who received widespread praise for her handling of the aftermath of the massacre - admitted Friday there was "much more" her country could do to tackle white supremacists.

Anjum Rahman, co-founder of the Islamic Women's Council of New Zealand said

there was an "undercurrent or rhetoric of hate... it isn't just our community, we see it a lot in online hate (towards) the transgender community. "I wouldn't say it's specifically just us, but we're feeling it."

Ms. Danzeisen, a former corporate lawyer in the U.S. who moved to New Zealand

14 years ago, said she believes the support shown to Muslims in the immediate aftermath of the shooting "surprised those in the fringe supremacist movements".

"As a result it's made them more defensive and more vitriolic, they've become louder," she said. The impact spreads beyond New Zealand. At the Al Noor mosque, Jabara Akhter Juti said her family in Bangladesh remain "very concerned about me" since she moved to Christchurch last year with her husband.

The imam at Al Noor, Gamal Fouda, wanted the broader impact of extremism addressed and not just confined to Muslims.

The inquiry into the mosque shootings is due to report back at the end of April.

SUDOKU

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

DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★★★★

Solution to yesterday's Sudoku

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

Escaping Boko Haram after being hired to bomb

Tasked with blowing up public establishments, these women not only tricked the terror group, but also hoodwinked fate

DIONNE SEARCEY
MAIDUGURI

The six young women set down their bombs and stood around the well, staring into the dark void.

As captives of Boko Haram, the women had been dispatched for the grimmest of missions: go blow up a mosque and everyone inside. The women wanted to get rid of their bombs without killing anyone, including themselves. One of them, Balaraba Mohammed, then a 19-year-old who had been blindfolded and kidnapped by Boko Haram a few months earlier, came up with a plan: they removed their headscarves and tied them into a long rope. Ms. Mohammed attached the bombs and gingerly lowered them into the well, praying it was filled with water. She let go. "We ran for our lives," Ms. Mohammed said.

In the decade-long war with Boko Haram that has coursed through northeast Nigeria and spread to three

neighbouring countries, more than 500 women have been deployed as suicide bombers or apprehended before they carried out their deadly missions - a number that terrorism experts said exceeds any other conflict in history. Some, like Ms. Mohammed and the women at the well, have bravely resisted, foiling the extremists' plans in quiet and often unheralded ways.

'Marry or be deployed'

Dozens of women interviewed by *The New York Times* have said that Boko Haram gave them a terrible choice: "marry" the group's fighters or be deployed as bombers. Captives have said some women chose instead to blow up only themselves. But some survived and want to tell their stories. Ms. Mohammed is one.

Ms. Mohammed said she arrived at the Boko Haram camp in a daze in 2012.

When fighters gave her a bomb, she said, "I felt as if I



War and peace: Balaraba Mohammed, centre, with her daughter Hairat in Maiduguri, Nigeria. •NYT

was dead." She knew she would have to go or be shot too. Which is how she found herself with five others at the edge of that well. The bombs didn't detonate, and the young women, scared and unsure what to do, ran back to the Boko Haram camp, Ms. Mohammed said. They swore on a Koran to their captors they had accomplished their mission and that they ran so fast to es-

cape that they lost their hijabs on the way.

The six women, two of them barely teenagers, had outsmarted Islamic extremists. But the women's relief was short-lived.

Fighters soon decided they were ruthless enough to be ready for weapons training, she said, handing them guns and lining up other captives for live target practice. Days went by, and fighters

came and went, engaging in fierce battles that claimed some of their lives. They wanted revenge. They prepared Ms. Mohammed and other women for a major operation: to blow up the Monday Market, the biggest in northeast Nigeria.

Lucky escape

Ms. Mohammed said she was sick and too weak to even get out of the car. She sat inside as bombs exploded, and the vehicle sped away. Ms. Mohammed was driven back to the camp and remained ill for several days, locked in a tin shack with other captives as they listened to fighters preparing for vigilante forces to invade the camp.

Hadiza Musa, who had joined the local vigilante force to avenge the Boko Haram capture of her sister, arrived to find a horrific scene: the entire camp was on fire, and there was carnage everywhere. In an attempt to distract the vigilantes, Ms. Musa said, it appeared that

Boko Haram had blown up their own camp and their captives and fled.

Ms. Musa said she sifted through the dead and came across Ms. Mohammed, who was unconscious with burns covering her body and blood pouring from what looked like a bullet wound to her leg. Ms. Musa cried as she helped ferry Ms. Mohammed to a hospital. Ms. Musa stayed by Ms. Mohammed, caring for her until she was conscious. The two now consider themselves sisters. Ms. Mohammed still bears scars from burns to her face, arms and legs.

Ms. Mohammed has started training to become a nurse. She wants to give back. But she couldn't afford fees for recent exams after an uncle kicked her out of his house, still suspicious of her time with militants.

Until she can save up money for the exam, she keeps a first aid kit with her, in case she comes across anyone needing help. •NY TIMES