

15 THE OUTBREAK THE WORLD

PANDEMIC WATCH



Boris Johnson

UNITED KINGDOM Boris sets up new measures as cases rise

London: British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has set up four new committees to help respond to a growing coronavirus outbreak, focusing on health, public sector preparedness, the economy and the international response to the pandemic. The four committees will feed into a daily meeting on coronavirus, part of new stringent measures to try to tackle an outbreak, and will help "refine" decisions taken at emergency meetings, which will continue to be chaired by Johnson, his office said in a statement. Meanwhile, British cases of coronavirus rose 26% to 1,950 from 1,543 the day before, the health ministry said.

NEPAL Indian among 5 held for mask stockpiling

Kathmandu: An Indian national was among five persons arrested here on Tuesday for stockpiling over one million masks to sell them in black market, police said. Shortage of masks due to the increased demand has prompted a growing black market in their sale. According to police, they raided a godown of RDG International Suppliers at Milanchowk area in Kathmandu and recovered 10,00,800 masks to be sold in black market. Five persons, including a 37-year-old resident of India's Rajasthan state, were arrested for stockpiling the masks.

AUSTRALIA Third lawmaker tests positive for coronavirus

Sydney: A third Australian government lawmaker has tested positive for the coronavirus ahead of the planned resumption of Parliament next week following a scheduled two-week break. New South Wales state Senator Andrew Bragg said Tuesday that he had suffered flu-like symptoms and tested positive for the virus after attending a friend's wedding on March 6. Authorities say at least six wedding guests have contracted the virus. Queensland state Senator Susan McDonald said she tested positive on Monday after becoming unwell on Friday evening.

Macron declares France at war with virus, EU proposes 30-day travel ban

Spain logs nearly 2,000 new cases, total infections cross 11,000

STEVEN ERLANGER
BRUSSELS, MARCH 17

ADOPTING MARTIAL language, President Emmanuel Macron ordered the French to stay at home for at least the next 15 days, as France put in place some of the most severe measures in Europe to try to curb the coronavirus.

The aggressive move by France came as other countries in the region introduced measures that their leaders described as unprecedented in postwar Europe, and as the European Union proposed a 30-day shutdown of all nonessential travel into the bloc from other countries.

The movement of French citizens will be tightly restricted, starting from midday on Tuesday and lasting through at least the end of the month, with people expected to stay home, leaving only for essential activities like food shopping. Anyone violating the order faces punishment.

"We are at war," Macron said in an address to the nation Monday night. "The enemy is invisible and it requires our general mobilisation."

Macron was responding to severe warnings from doctors about an increasingly dire situation. Jérôme Salomon, a top official at France's health ministry, told France Inter radio on Monday that the situation in France was "deteriorating



A man waits for his flight at the airport in Malaga, Spain, on Tuesday. Reuters

very quickly."

Spain on Tuesday confirmed nearly 2,000 new cases of COVID-19, sending the total spiralling past 11,000, with 491 deaths, the health ministry said. Over the past 24 hours, the number of people infected rose by 1,987, hiking the overall total to 11,178, the ministry's emergency coordinator Fernando Simon said.

In Germany, Chancellor Angela Merkel announced a new raft of measures to minimise social contact: Religious services will be banned, and bars, clubs, discotheques and brothels shut. Restaurants will be allowed to

open but only until 6 pm, with wide spacing among diners, and hotels are being asked not to accept tourists. Schools across Germany were preparing for a prolonged shutdown.

The proposed travel ban into the EU, which could be extended beyond 30 days, was vital to keep internal borders of the bloc — and the Schengen free-travel zone — as open as possible to promote European solidarity and to help the Continent's economy, which appears to be heading into a recession, said Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission. WITHPTIINPUTS

MEDICAL & RESEARCH DEVELOPMENTS

■ Australian researchers said they have mapped the immune responses from one of country's first patients, an important step in developing a vaccine and treatment

■ Russian scientists have begun to test vaccine prototypes for the virus, and plan to present the most effective one by June, as per officials

■ China has completed the clinical research of Favipiravir - an antiviral drug that has shown good clinical efficacy against COVID-19, a top Chinese official said on Tuesday

■ WHO called on people to avoid self-medicating with ibuprofen, instead using paracetamol, over concerns that the former could worsen symptoms

Spying on the virus: Israel secret service to track patients

ASSOCIATED PRESS
JERUSALEM, MARCH 17

THE HEAD of Israel's shadowy Shin Bet internal security service said on Tuesday that his agency received Cabinet approval overnight to start deploying its counter-terrorism tech measures to help curb the spread of the new coronavirus in Israel.

While Nadav Argaman acknowledged that using the agency's capabilities on sick Israeli citizens deviates from Shin Bet's typical operations against Palestinian militants, he said the goal was still in line with its overall mission of "saving lives."

He vowed there would be stringent oversight to maintain individual privacy and that operatives would only use their findings to warn those that may be exposed to the virus - rather than enforcing any government-mandated quarantine.

"The other state bodies don't have the necessary technological means to aid this effort," Argaman said in a statement. "I am well aware of the sensitivity of this matter and therefore have instructed that only a very limited number of agents will be handling this and the information will not be saved in the Shin

EXPLAINED E. Privacy issues flagged

DESPITE ASSURANCES from Shin Bet about limitations under the use of data under this measure, activists have raised concerns about privacy issues. This comes days after the UN said that emergency virus measures cannot be used to infringe on human rights. There are also concerns that electoral issues allowed for this move to bypass the required oversight of a special parliamentary subcommittee.

Bet database."

The move was announced by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as part of a series of sweeping measures to step the outbreak and immediately raised concerns from civil-liberties advocates that the practice would raise serious privacy issues.

COVID-19 OUTBREAK: FOUR KEY FIGURES

\$7.3 bn
New Zealand announced a \$7.3 billion stimulus package to counter economic shock caused by the pandemic and the response to it

85,000
Prisoners temporarily freed from Iranian jails, including political prisoners, in response to the epidemic, an judiciary spokesman said Tuesday.

55,000
What the UK gov't's chief scientific adviser said was a 'reasonable' estimate of coronavirus infections, based on the expected death rate of one in 1,000 cases.

1
Only one confirmed new case of the virus was reported in Wuhan, the initial epicentre. China had said it would start recalling medical staff from the district

US, China accuse each other of COVID-19 fear-mongering

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
WASHINGTON, MARCH 17

THE UNITED States and China on Monday each demanded that the other stop smearing its reputation over the novel coronavirus as Donald Trump referred to the pathogen as the "Chinese Virus."

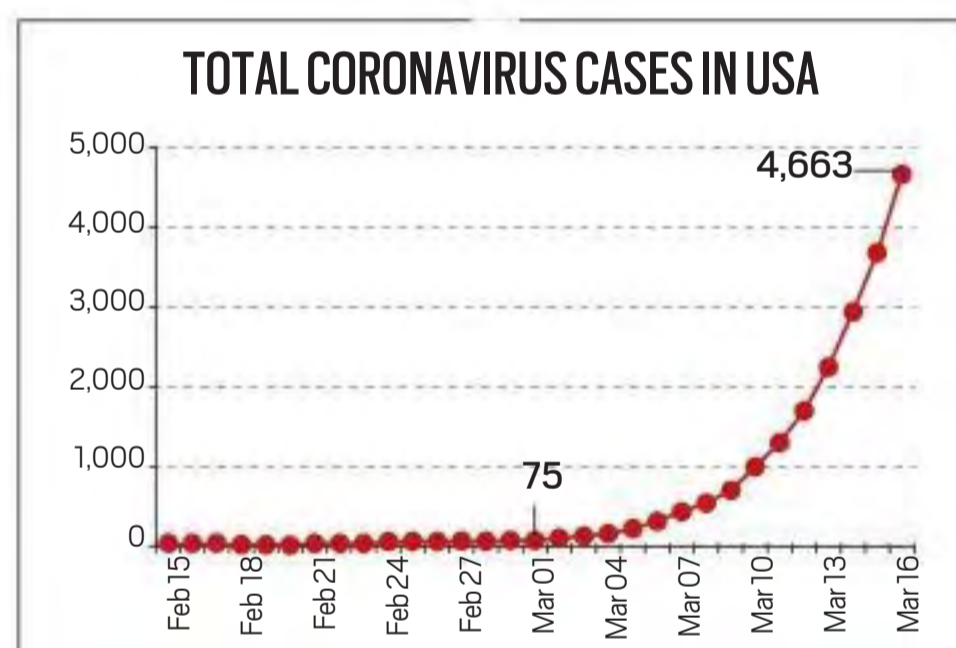
"The United States will be powerfully supporting those industries, like Airlines and others, that are particularly affected by the Chinese Virus," the US president tweeted Monday night.

Critics slammed the move, calling it racist. However, Trump defended the tweet. "It did come from China, so I think it's very accurate," he said.

Trump indicated that another motive was payback for what he said was China's disinformation campaign blaming the US military for the virus.

"I didn't appreciate the fact that China was saying that our military gave it to them. Our military did not give it to anybody."

Foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian, in tweets last week in both Mandarin and English, suggested that "patient zero" in the pandemic may have come from the US. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo speaking to Chinese official Yang Jiechi, voiced anger that Beijing has used official channels "to shift blame for COVID-19 to the United States".



US ramps up drive to slow spread of outbreak

STEVE HOLLAND & MARIA CASPANI
WASHINGTON, NEW YORK, MARCH 17

THE WHITE House, under pressure to escalate national action to combat the coronavirus, urged Americans on Monday to avoid gatherings of more than 10 people and called for closing bars, restaurants and other venues in states where local virus transmission exists.

But President Donald Trump refrained from ordering sweeping public quarantines, lockdowns or curfews for the time



Measures taken at a bank in Tehran on Tuesday. Reuters

DEATH TOLL NEARS 1,000

Iran warns virus could kill millions

ASSOCIATED PRESS
TEHRAN, MARCH 17

IRAN ISSUED its most dire warning yet on Tuesday about the outbreak of the new coronavirus ravaging the country, suggesting "millions" could die in the Islamic Republic if the public keeps travelling and ignoring health guidance.

A state television journalist who also is a medical doctor gave the warning only hours after hard-line Shiite faithful the previous night pushed their way into the courtyards of two major shrines that had just been closed over fears of the virus.

Meanwhile, Iran's supreme leader issued a religious ruling prohibiting "unnecessary" travel in the country.

Roughly nine out of 10 of the over 18,000 cases of the new virus confirmed across the Middle East come from Iran, where authorities denied for days the risk the outbreak posed. Officials have now implemented new checks for people trying to leave major cities ahead of Nowruz, the Persian New Year, on Friday, but have hesitated to

quarantine the areas.

That's even as the death toll in Iran saw another 13 per cent increase on Tuesday. Health Ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour said the virus had killed 135 more people to raise the total to 988 amid over 16,000 cases.

The Iranian state TV journalist, Dr Afroz Eslami, cited a study by Tehran's prestigious Sharif University of Technology, which offered three scenarios. If people begin to cooperate now, Iran will see 120,000 infections and 12,000 deaths before the outbreak is over, she said. If they offer medium cooperation, there will be 300,000 cases and 110,000 deaths, she said.

But if people fail to follow any guidance, it could collapse Iran's already-strained medical system, Eslami said. If the "medical facilities are not sufficient, there will be 4 million cases, and 3.5 million people will die," she said.

Eslami did not elaborate on what metrics the study used, but even reporting it on Iran's tightly controlled state television represented a major change for a country whose officials had for days denied the severity of the crisis.

Cases spike to 212, confusion over first death in Pak

SAJJAD HUSSAIN & MZULQERNAIN
ISLAMABAD/LAHORE, MARCH 17

THE NUMBER of confirmed coronavirus cases in Pakistan sharply rose to 212 on Tuesday, amidst conflicting statements by authorities on the nation's first casualty due to the viral infection.

Meanwhile, there were conflicting statements on the first coronavirus death in Pakistan.

Earlier in the day, Punjab Health Minister Yasmin Rashid in a press conference in Lahore confirmed Pakistan's first casualty due to the novel coronavirus.

"One COVID-19 patient who was brought from Hafizabad, some 150 km from Lahore, died here on Tuesday," he said.

In a statement, the National Command and Control Centre also confirmed the death. According to the statement, the patient, who came from Muscat on March 15 and was tested positive, was admitted to Lahore's Mayo Hospital where he died on Tuesday.

However, later in the day, Punjab Chief Minister Usman Buzdar rejected the statements. He in a tweet said that according to the test report, the person did not die of coronavirus. PTI

THAILAND

Major govt office bombed as officials meet over outbreak

ASSOCIATED PRESS
BANGKOK, MARCH 17

BOMBERS ATTACKED a major government office in Thailand's insurgency-plagued far south as hundreds of local officials and Muslim clerics met Tuesday to discuss fighting COVID-19.

At least 20 people were hurt, none seriously.

The Southern Border Provinces Administration Center in the capital of Yala province coordinates government policy in the region where a Muslim separatist insurgency since 2004 has led to the deaths of about 7,000 civil-

ians, soldiers, government workers and rebels.

Yala Hospital reported 20 people were hurt in the attack. None was badly injured, said Colonel Pramote Prom-in, a spokesman for the center.

Surveillance video showed the bomber parking a pickup truck in front of the center and then placing another explosive device in the middle of the road before fleeing on a waiting motorcycle, said police Colonel Naravue Binwae-arong of the Yala police station. Luring security personnel and first responders with an initial blast and then detonating a second device is a common insurgent tactic.

'WE DON'T KNOW WHERE TO PUT THEM... IT TAKES TIME AND THE DEAD ARE MANY'

Funerals postponed, Italy's victims face death alone

JASON HOROWITZ & EMMA BUBOLA
ROME, MARCH 17

AT AROUND midnight on Wednesday, Renzo Carlo Testa, 85, died from the coronavirus in a hospital in the northern Italian town of Bergamo. Five days later, his body was still sitting in a coffin, one of scores lined head-to-toe in the church of the local cemetery, which is itself closed to the public.

His wife of 50 years, Franca Stefanelli, would like to give him a proper funeral. But traditional funeral services are illegal

throughout Italy now, part of the national restrictions against gatherings and going out that have been put in place to try to stem the spread of Europe's worst outbreak of the coronavirus. In any case, she and her sons could not attend anyway, because they are themselves sick and in quarantine.

"It's a strange thing," Stefanelli, 70, said, struggling to explain what she was going through. "It's not anger. It's impotence in the face of this virus."

The coronavirus epidemic raging through Italy has already left streets empty and shops shuttered as 60 million Italians



Undertakers at a cemetery in Bergamo, Italy. AP

are essentially under house arrest. There are the exhausted

doctors and nurses toiling day and night to keep people alive.

There are children hanging drawings of rainbows from their windows and families singing from their balconies.

But the ultimate metric of pandemics and plagues is the bodies they leave behind. In Italy, with the oldest population in Europe, the toll has been heavy, with more than 2,100 deaths, the most outside of China. On Monday alone, more than 300 people died.

Hospital morgues there are inundated. Bergamo's mayor, Giorgio Gori, issued an ordinance that closed the local cemetery this week for the first time since World War II, though

he guaranteed that its mortuary would still accept coffins. Many of them had been sent to the Church of All Saints in Bergamo, located in the closed cemetery, where scores of waxed wooden coffins form a macabre line for cremations.

"Unfortunately, we don't know where to put them," said Brother Marco Bergamelli, one of the priests at the church. He said that with hundreds dying each day, and with each body taking more than an hour to cremate, there was an awful backlog. "It takes time and the dead are many." NYT