

France locks down over pandemic fears

Macron asks the French to stay at home for 15 days; EU plans to ban non-essential travel to continent

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
PARIS

France moved into a near-total lockdown on Tuesday over fears of COVID-19 spread, the latest country to impose draconian restrictions affecting the lives of millions of people.

European leaders also plan to ban all non-essential travel into the continent on Tuesday in a bid to stem a pandemic that has killed thousands, upended society and battered economies.

With French President Emmanuel Macron describing the battle against COVID-19 as a "war", governments around the world are scrambling to keep the public safe, slamming borders shut and forcing citizens to stay home.

The crisis is infecting every sector of the economy, and global stocks have been on a rollercoaster ride, with Wall Street on Monday sinking more than 12% in the worst session since the crash of 1987.

After the initial outbreak

COVID-19

in a Chinese city in December, Europe has emerged as the epicentre of the virus SARS-CoV-2, with more deaths now recorded outside China than inside.

COVID-19 has now killed more than 7,000 people worldwide, including over 2,100 in Italy, the worst-hit country outside China, and over 1,80,000 cases have been recorded in 145 countries.

In a sombre address to the nation, Mr. Macron ordered the French to stay at home for 15 days from midday Tuesday, following similar measures by other European countries.

Most shops, restaurants and tourist sites in the

world's most visited country are already shuttered, but in some areas desperate shoppers crowded supermarkets before the new rules took effect.

About 1,00,000 police and gendarmes will be out on the streets to enforce the measures, after Mr. Macron warned violations would be punished. "We are at war, a public health war certainly. We are fighting not against an Army or another nation. But the enemy is there, invisible and elusive and on the move," he said.

Meanwhile, Spain on Tuesday confirmed nearly 2,000 new cases of COVID-19, sending the total spiralling past 11,000, with 491 deaths.

With European nations already closing their borders, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said she would ask the leaders of the bloc's Schengen visa-free border zone to stop all non-essential travel into the area.

Test, test, test: WHO

The head of the World Health Organization called on Monday for every suspected COVID-19 case to be tested, something which would send the known tally of the sick sky-rocketing.

"You cannot fight a fire while blindfolded," Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told journalists. "Test, test, test. Test every suspected case."

"Every country, with no exceptions, needs to take their boldest actions to stop or slow down the virus threat," Hans Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe, told a press conference on Tuesday.

Meanwhile, Iran announced another 135 deaths from the disease, bringing the toll to 988 in one of the world's worst-hit countries.



Towering problem: A couple standing in front of the Eiffel tower in Paris on Tuesday, a few hours before the order to all French citizens to stay indoors came into effect. ■ AFP

Polish Ministers are being tested, under quarantine

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
WARSAW

Poland's Ministers were under self-quarantine on Tuesday after one of them tested positive for COVID-19 as authorities introduced sweeping measures to combat the spread of the disease.

All members of the government, who attended a March 10 meeting, had been tested and the results should be known by Tuesday, said Michal Dworzcyk, head of the Prime Minister's chancellery.

"Until that time, all these people remain in quarantine," he told Polish Radio.

Poland's Environment Minister Michal Wos said Monday he was under quarantine after testing positive for the novel coronavirus, adding that he was feeling fine.

Prime Minister Mateusz

Morawiecki was among the 15 government members under self-quarantine on Tuesday, along with the Ministers of health, defence, interior, justice and culture, he said.

Members of the government were all "working remotely", Mr. Dworzcyk added.

A nation of 38 million people, Poland was among the first EU members to introduce sweeping measures to contain the spread of the deadly novel coronavirus, including shutting its borders to foreign travellers, closing schools and urging citizens to stay home.

It had 205 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including five deaths, as of Tuesday morning, with the Health Ministry warning cases could rise above 1,000 this week.

Just one fresh case in Wuhan

ASSOCIATED PRESS
MADRID

China on Tuesday reported 21 new cases of the virus, 20 of them imported. Just one new case was confirmed in Wuhan, where the illness was first detected in late December. The update raised China's totals to 80,881 cases and 3,226 deaths.

Pak. reports 212 cases

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
LAHORE

The number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in Pakistan sharply rose to 212 on Tuesday, amid conflicting statements by authorities on the nation's first casualty, a suspected patient in Lahore, due to the SARS-CoV-2 infection.

Trump administration seeks \$850 billion stimulus fund

Package to contain the economic damage from COVID-19

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
WASHINGTON

U.S. President Donald Trump will ask Congress to approve a massive \$850 billion emergency spending package to contain the growing economic damage from the COVID-19 pandemic, according to media reports on Tuesday.

The measures are expected to include a payroll tax cut and \$50 billion in aid to troubled U.S. airlines hit hard by the near total shutdown in the travel industry, *The Washington Post* reported, citing four officials familiar with the matter.

The package, which is in addition to the \$100 billion in spending directed at paid sick leave and expanded unemployment benefits already moving through Congress, surpasses the \$700 billion emergency program known as TARP to save the banking system during the



Donald Trump

2008 global financial crisis. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin is expected to present the proposal to Senate Republicans, the *Post* reported.

Democratic package

Republican leaders last week dismissed the Democratic package in the house as an inflated wish list of items. And since then the damage has accelerated with businesses forced to close

and whole States under lockdown.

Mr. Trump has been pushing for a cut or suspension of taxes deducted from all American paychecks at least through the November presidential election.

But Democrats and many economists say focus on payroll taxes misses workers who are laid off, unemployed or are paid hourly.

Most economists agree the crisis calls for a massive response to flood the economy with cash to keep households and businesses afloat.

The Federal Reserve has slashed the benchmark lending rate to zero, where it was during the 2009 global financial crisis.

It has taken extraordinary steps to ensure the financial system has plenty of cash to keep it from locking up, but Fed Chair Jerome Powell said a fiscal response will be "critical."

U.S. and China exchange barbs

Trump calls SARS-CoV-2 'Chinese virus'; Beijing slams usage

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BEIJING

A spat between the U.S. and China over COVID-19 escalated on Tuesday as President Donald Trump angered Beijing by referring to the pathogen as the "Chinese Virus."

The two countries have sparred over the origin of the virus for days, with a Chinese official promoting conspiracy theories claiming it was brought to China by the U.S. Army and American officials using terms seen as stigmatising a nation.

"The U.S. will be powerfully supporting those indus-

tries, like Airlines and others, that are particularly affected by the Chinese Virus," Mr. Trump tweeted on Monday night.

He doubled down on the comment on Tuesday while tweeting about how U.S. States were being affected, saying: "Some are being hit hard by the Chinese Virus, some are being hit practically not at all."

"It did come from China, so I think it's very accurate," the U.S. President told a news conference.

Mr. Trump's allies had previously referred to the

pandemic as "Chinese coronavirus", but Beijing said on Tuesday it was "strongly indignant" over the phrase, which it called "a kind of stigmatisation".

The U.S. should "immediately stop its unjustified accusations against China," Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said.

A commentary by the official Xinhua news agency said using "racist and xenophobic names to cast blame on other countries can only reveal politicians' irresponsibility and incompetence which will intensify fears".

Little-known ex-Governor Zurfi named new Iraqi PM

He is tasked with forming a government within 30 days

REUTERS
BAGHDAD

Iraq's President designated Adnan al-Zurfi, a former regional Governor with little national political profile, as Prime Minister, tasked with forming a government within 30 days in a bid to overcome months of unrest and political deadlock.

Mr. Zurfi, who served as Governor of the predominantly Shi'ite Najaf province during the U.S. occupation after the fall of Saddam Hussein, is head of the small Nasr parliamentary group of former Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, a U.S. ally.

Lawmakers told Reuters that President Barham Salih had named Mr. Zurfi only after larger rival Shi'ite political parties failed to decide



Adnan al-Zurfi

on a successor to Adel Abdul Mahdi, who resigned in November during mass unrest, in which hundreds of people died.

Mr. Zurfi, who lived in the U.S. as a refugee in the 1990s after fleeing Saddam, is seen as a comparatively secular figure in a country long dominated by sectarian parties.

He now has to win the confidence of Parliament for his new Cabinet, a difficult task as major Iranian-backed groups objected to his nomination.

"Zurfi will face tough resistance inside Parliament and he will need a miracle to pass his government," said a Shi'ite lawmaker, on condition of anonymity.

If Mr. Zurfi can secure parliamentary approval for his Cabinet, he would run the country until early elections can be held.

He is the second politician Mr. Salih has tapped to form a government since Adel Mahdi announced his resignation. On February 1, Mr. Salih named Mohammed Alawi as PM-designate, but he withdrew his candidacy.

Sri Lanka infections jump to 43

Government suspends all international flight arrivals for two weeks

MEERA SRINIVASAN
COLOMBO

Even as the number of COVID-19 cases in Sri Lanka rose to 43 on Tuesday, the government decided to suspend all international flight arrivals for two weeks beginning Wednesday midnight, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's office said.

The move, according to government officials, is aimed at halting entry of any possible new cases into the country, and allowing health officials to focus on arresting the spread of the pandemic within the country.

In a televised address to the country, Mr. Rajapaksa asked all citizens to support the government in combatting COVID-19 and sought a strong mandate in the general elections scheduled next month. Sri Lanka is scheduled to hold parliamentary



No entry: A worker spraying disinfectant at a bus terminal in Colombo, Sri Lanka, on Monday. ■ AP

elections on April 25, that many opposition parties want postponed in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak.

On Tuesday alone, 15 new cases of COVID 19 were reported by Sri Lanka's Health Ministry. While it remains unclear how many suspected patients the Sri Lankan health officials have been able to test every day since

missions in India on Tuesday took efforts to ensure the speedy return of 300 pilgrims currently touring India, officials said.

Maldives steps up fight

The Maldivian Cabinet on Tuesday decided to cut MVR 1 billion (nearly \$65 million) from its annual budget and redirect the amount towards efforts to combat COVID-19, government spokesman Maabrook Azeez told *The Hindu* from Male via telephone.

The Maldives has so far confirmed 13 cases of COVID-19. All of them are foreigners who were visiting the island nation. "Our economy depends almost entirely on our tourism sector. With that and our imports taking a big hit after the coronavirus outbreak, we are gearing up with a swift strategy," he said.

ELSEWHERE



U.S.-led coalition troops to leave Iraq bases

BAGHDAD The U.S.-led coalition will redeploy hundreds of troops from bases in Iraq, including to outside the country, U.S. officials said on Tuesday. The announcement came hours after a rocket attack on an Iraqi base housing foreign troops, the 24th such attack in less than six months. ■ AFP

Malaysia recovers \$322 mn from 1MDB

KUALA LUMPUR Malaysia has recovered \$322 million stolen from the scandal-hit sovereign wealth fund 1MDB — a fraction of the more than \$4.5 billion U.S. prosecutors say was looted. Steps are being taken to recover another \$1.6 billion, Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin's office said. ■ AFP

Biden wins Washington Democratic primary

He won 5 of 6 States in March 10 voting

ASSOCIATED PRESS
WASHINGTON

Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden has been declared the winner of last week's Democratic presidential primary in Washington State, giving him victories in five out of six States that voted on March 10.

After nearly a week of counting votes, the former Vice-President on Monday held onto a small lead over Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders that turned out to be insurmountable.

Washington was a State that Mr. Sanders had been hoping to win.

In 2016, he won more than two-thirds of the delegates from the Washington caucuses over Hillary Clinton.

Of the State's 89 pledged delegates, only 31 are allo-

cated based on the State-wide result. The remaining 58 are determined based on the results of the State's 10 congressional districts, and those results might not be calculated until the election is certified by the secretary of State's office, which could be as late as March 27.

In Washington, Democrats used vote by mail for the first time to allocate delegates instead of the smaller caucuses used in previous years.

Mr. Biden won four other States last Tuesday — Missouri, Mississippi and Florida — held primaries on Tuesday. Ohio called off its primary, citing the need to combat COVID-19.

Bernie Sanders wants to fight on and he has his reasons

By continuing to fight, Sanders could accrue delegates to use as leverage in negotiations with Biden for policy concessions

SYDNEY EMBER
WASHINGTON

Senator Bernie Sanders jabbed his finger in the air. He left Joe Biden resorting to misstatements to defend his record on bankruptcy legislation. He instructed viewers to "go to the YouTube" to check out the former Vice-President's record themselves.

It was not the kind of debate performance suggesting a candidate ready for reconciliation.

After delivering a speech last week that appeared aimed at de-escalating the primary battle against Mr. Biden, Mr. Sanders laced into his opponent on Sunday night with a vigour that signalled that the fight — if not for delegates, then for the soul of the Democratic Party — was not over.

Under intense pressure to

win nominating contests and already grappling with the effects of COVID-19 on the election, Mr. Sanders and his aides are now struggling to reconcile a sense of resignation and a desire to press on.

Yet even as his path to the nomination looks increasingly bleak, some allies are publicly urging Mr. Sanders to remain in the race, eager for him to continue to pitch voters on a liberal agenda that he has promoted for decades.

"I want the Senator to stay in," Nina Turner, one of the campaign's national co-chairs, said in an interview on Monday. "I think other voters have a right to have a choice. This is not a coronation. We know what happened last time in 2016 — it gave us Donald J. Trump."

This campaign, she added, was "the culmination of



Playing safe: Joe Biden, left, and Bernie Sanders do an elbow bump instead of the usual handshake in Washington. ■ REUTERS

this man's life's work."

The decision on whether to drop out or continue the campaign is one that ultimately rests with Mr. Sanders and his wife, Jane Sanders, allies and friends say.

Some of Mr. Sanders' aides and supporters privately acknowledged that his

chances are daunting if not impossible given the broad coalition of Democrats that Mr. Biden appears to have assembled, and Mr. Sanders' inability to bring new voters under his tent. But they describe Mr. Sanders as a fighter, whose instinct will be to keep battling. They also see

an advantage in continuing to accrue delegates to use as leverage in negotiations with Mr. Biden over potential policy concessions.

To several of Mr. Sanders' aides and allies, the aggressiveness their candidate showed on the debate stage was a way of holding Mr. Biden accountable on the issues Mr. Sanders cares deeply about.

Inspired leadership

"Even though Joe Biden is ahead in delegates at the moment, he is far from unifying the party," Jeff Weaver, a long-time Sanders adviser, said after the debate. "And he hasn't made the case that he can provide the kind of inspired leadership necessary to beat Donald Trump."

However, some of his biggest supporters suggested that the race was effectively

over and that the time had come for Democrats to unite behind Mr. Biden.

"The chance of getting the nomination is so tiny, the stakes are so high given Mr. Trump and COVID-19 and the economic fallout, that he does not need to face that reality," Robert Reich, a former labour secretary who endorsed Mr. Sanders, said in an interview on Monday.

Mr. Reich said that some onus was on Mr. Biden to demonstrate to Mr. Sanders that he is sufficiently devoted to progressive causes. The former Vice-President could do that, Mr. Reich said, by naming Mr. Sanders as a top policy adviser to his campaign or by naming Senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts as his running mate. "It's the only way he's going to get the type of enthusiasm he needs," he said. ■ NY TIMES