

World grapples with 'once-in-100-year' virulence

COVID-19 has now infected more than 2,00,000 people in 164 nations; Australian PM warns crisis could last six months

REUTERS
SYDNEY/BEIJING

Hundreds of millions of people worldwide were adjusting on Wednesday to once-in-a-generation measures to battle the COVID-19 pandemic that is not only killing the old and vulnerable but also threatening prolonged economic misery.

The disease that jumped from animals to humans in China has now infected more than 2,00,000 people and caused nearly 8,500 deaths in 164 nations, triggering emergency lockdowns and injections of cash unseen since Second World War.

"This is a once-in-a-hundred-year type event," said Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, warning the crisis could last six months as his nation became the latest to restrict gatherings and overseas travel.

"Life is changing in Australia, as it is changing all around the world," he added, as his government prepared for a potentially exponential rise after only six deaths so far.

Alarm in Italy

There was particular alarm in Italy, which has reported 2,978 deaths.

Around the world, rich and poor alike saw lives turned upside-down as events were cancelled, shops stripped, workplaces emptied, streets deserted.

The crisis has created a wave of solidarity in some countries, with neighbours, families and colleagues coming together to look after the most needy, including dropping supplies at the doors of those forced to stay indoors.

COVID-19

Spooked by a seemingly inevitable global recession, rich nations are unleashing billions of dollars in stimulus to economies, aid to health services, loans to tottering businesses, and help for individuals fearful for mortgages and other routine payments.

"We have never lived through anything like this. And our society, which had

In the grip of fear

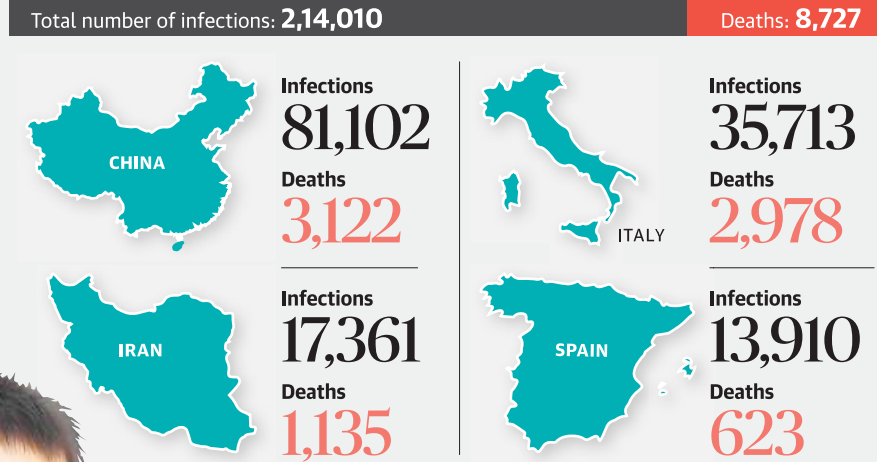
Since the new coronavirus first emerged in late December, more than **8,000** people have died around the world as countries are battling to contain its spread

Turkey, Bangladesh, Moldova and Burkina Faso report their first deaths



HARDEST HIT

Source: Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center



HERE ARE THE LATEST DEVELOPMENTS IN THE CRISIS

ENTRY BAN

- Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission, admits political leaders in the EU "underestimated" the magnitude of the danger posed by the coronavirus
- EU leaders agree to impose an entry ban on travellers from outside the bloc for 30 days

STRICT LOCKDOWN

- France follows Italy and Spain in imposing general lockdown for at least 15 days
- Belgium orders its citizens to stay at home until at least April 5
- Germany orders its population to stay at home while Britain and Israel call on citizens to avoid all non-essential travel
- In Russia, where borders are closed to foreigners, schools will close from March 23 to April 12, and flights to Britain, the U.S. and the UAE will be suspended from March 20
- In Pakistan, Prime Minister Imran Khan says the country cannot afford the large-scale lockdowns undertaken in the West, fearing this could devastate

ECONOMIC CONCERNS

- German carmaker BMW says it will close European and South African factories
- The Trump administration and the U.S. central bank announce massive financial assistance to the most affected businesses

STATE OF EMERGENCY

- Switzerland, Armenia, Moldova and Kazakhstan and two regions in Ukraine and one in Kyrgyzstan declare a state of emergency

CRUISE SHIP STRANDED

More than **1,700** people are stranded on a cruise ship off the South African coast over fears that some are infected

grown used to changes that expand our possibilities of knowledge, health and life, now finds itself in a war to defend all we have taken for granted," Spain's Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez Sanchez told Parliament.

'Africa should wake up' Meanwhile, the head of the World Health Organization said on Wednesday that while Africa so far had seen few cases of COVID-19, the continent should "prepare for the worst".

"Africa should wake up," Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said.

'Virus can persist in air for hours'

REUTERS

The novel coronavirus can remain viable and infectious in droplets in the air for hours and on surfaces up to days, says a new study by scientists from the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. The study was published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* on Tuesday.

Trump calls for national unity against COVID-19

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
WASHINGTON

U.S. President Donald Trump on Tuesday called for a unified national response to the COVID-19 threat, after coming under fire for downplaying the pandemic and allowing states to go their own way.

Mr. Trump's call came as Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said the White House was presenting a

massive stimulus plan to Congress and was looking at sending direct payments to all Americans, as well as aid to embattled airlines.

In a White House appearance, Mr. Trump said, "We are looking to save the maximum number of lives. Everything else is going to come back, but a life is not going to come back." The outbreak has spread to all 50 U.S. States.

Tehran reports 147 more deaths

ASSOCIATED PRESS
TEHRAN

Iran reported its single biggest jump in deaths from COVID-19 on Wednesday as another 147 people died, raising the country's toll to 1,135. The nearly 15% spike in deaths – amid a total of 17,361 cases in Iran – marks the biggest 24-hour rise in fatalities. Iran's Deputy Health Minister, Alireza Raisi, urged the public to avoid crowded places.

Pak. Foreign Minister in self-quarantine

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
ISLAMABAD

Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi said on Wednesday that he will self-isolate for five days after his recent trip to China. COVID-19 has infected 249 people in the country.

Mr. Qureshi visited China to seek cooperation, especially in controlling the disease in Pakistan.

103-year-old Iran woman survives

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
TEHRAN

A 103-year-old woman in Iran has recovered from COVID-19, state media reported, despite overwhelming evidence the elderly are most at risk from the disease. The woman was the second elderly patient in Iran to have survived after a 91-year-old man fought off the coronavirus.

Italy reports 475 new COVID-19 deaths

Highest one-day rise for any nation

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
ROME

Italy on Wednesday reported 475 new deaths from COVID-19, the highest one-day official toll of any nation since the first case was detected in China late last year.

Total deaths in Italy have reached 2,978, more than half of all the cases recorded outside China, while the number of infections stood at 35,713.

The previous record high of 368 deaths was also recorded in Italy, on Sunday.

The nation of 60 million has now recorded 34.2% of all the deaths officially attributed to COVID-19 across the world.

With the death rate still climbing despite the Mediterranean country entering a second week under effective lockdown, officials urged Italians to have faith and to stay strong.

"They main thing is, do not give up," Italian National Institute of Health chief Silvio Brusaferro said in a televised press conference.

"It will take a few days before we see the benefits" of containment measures, said Mr. Brusaferro.

"We must maintain these measures to see their effect, and above all to protect the most vulnerable."

Imposed nationally on March 12, the shutdown of most Italian businesses and a ban on public gatherings are due to expire on March 25.

But school closures and other measures, such as a ban on public attendance at sporting events, are due to run on until April 3.

A top government Minister hinted on Wednesday that the school closure would be extended well into next month, if not longer.

The rates within Italy itself remained stable, with two-thirds of the deaths – 1,959 in all – reported in the northern Lombardy region around Milan, the Italian financial capital. Emilia-Romagna region suffered 458 fatalities, and Piedmont region has had 154 deaths.

China to extend \$500 mn 'assistance' to Sri Lanka

50 cases have been recorded so far

MEERA SRINIVASAN
COLOMBO

China will extend financial assistance amounting to \$500 million to Sri Lanka to help the island nation combat COVID-19 that has affected 50 persons so far. One patient has recovered, authorities said.

According to a press statement from the Chinese Embassy here, the Finance Ministry of Sri Lanka and the China Development Bank (CDB) on Wednesday signed the agreement, with "big concessional terms on both interest and tenure", at Temple Trees, the official residence of Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa.

"The facility was urgently requested by the Sri Lankan

government and supported by the Chinese side, under current financial situation in Sri Lanka and the background of fighting COVID-19 pandemic with all-out efforts," the Chinese Embassy's statement said.

The maturity period of 10 years, the statement said, is the "longest tenure" of financing facility for Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka and China enjoy strong ties, including development cooperation in key infrastructure projects in the island.

In February, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa gifted a consignment of Ceylon Tea to the Chinese Embassy, to be sent to those affected by COVID-19 in China.

Bernie Sanders to 'assess' campaign

Joe Biden sweeps Tuesday's primaries in Florida, Illinois and Arizona

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
WASHINGTON

Leftist Bernie Sanders was under fresh pressure on Wednesday to bow out of the race for the Democratic White House nomination after losing the three latest primaries in contests hobbled by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Political moderate Joe Biden swept all three of Tuesday's contests, building a solid lead in delegates to the party's July nominating convention as Democratic voters appeared to coalesce around him as the best chance to defeat President Donald Trump in November.

Mr. Sanders, once the race's frontrunner, was considering his options as more states postponed their primary votes amid a national



Big blow: Joe Biden, left, and Bernie Sanders during the Democratic presidential debate on Sunday. •AP

shutdown for the COVID-19 emergency.

"The next primary contest is at least three weeks away," said Mr. Sanders' campaign manager Faiz Shakir in a statement. "Senator Sanders is going to be having conversations with supporters to assess his campaign."

Mr. Biden handily trounced Mr. Sanders in each of Tuesday's battlegrounds.

In the biggest prize of Florida, the 77-year-old former Vice-President grabbed 62% of the vote against 23% for 78-year-old Mr. Sanders.

In Illinois, Mr. Biden

topped 59% to Mr. Sanders' 36%, and in Arizona, Mr. Biden came in with more than 43% to Mr. Sanders' nearly 32%, while former New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who has already withdrawn from the race, came in a distant third.

Mr. Biden has now won 19 of the 24 contests, with just over half to be held.

The victories underscored Mr. Biden's position as the party's frontrunner and the eagerness of Democratic leaders and party rank and file to come together around a moderate flag bearer, to challenge Mr. Trump.

According to a count by RealClearPolitics, Mr. Biden has racked up 1,147 delegates to Mr. Sanders' 861, with 1,991 needed to capture the nomination.

Iraq's Shia parties line up to oppose new PM-designate

They say President should have consulted them

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BAGHDAD

Iraq's typically divided Shiite political parties lined up on Wednesday to signal their opposition to premier-designate Adnan al-Zurfi, less than 24 hours after his nomination.

The 54-year-old lawmaker and former Najaf Governor was nominated on Tuesday to be Iraq's new Prime Minister, the second attempt to replace outgoing premier Adel Abdel Mahdi this year.

But several Shia blocs have already signalled their displeasure.

On Wednesday, the State of Law coalition, led by ex-PM Nuri al-Maliki, and lawmakers linked to the rela-



Unpopular move: People passing by a defaced poster of Prime Minister-designate Adnan Al-Zurfi in Baghdad. •AP

tively moderate cleric Ammar al-Hakim said they opposed the President's unilateral selection of the Prime Minister.

President Barham Saleh, they insisted, should have referred to Parliament's largest bloc to select a nomi-

nee. The powerful Fatah bloc had also slammed Mr. Zurfi's nomination as unconstitutional.

Along with smaller parties, those opposed could add up to more than 100 lawmakers voting against a Cabinet led by Mr. Zurfi.

ELSEWHERE



Probability experts win Abel prize in Mathematics

OSLO
The Abel Prize for Mathematics was on Wednesday awarded to Israeli-American Hillel Furstenberg and Russian-born Gregory Margulis, both probability experts, the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters said. •AFP

4 soldiers, 7 militants killed in shootout in Pak.

PESHAWAR
Pakistani security forces on Wednesday raided a militant hideout in a former Taliban stronghold near the town of Dattakhel, bordering Afghanistan, triggering a shootout that killed four soldiers and seven militants, the military said. •AP

IMF rejects Venezuela's \$5 bn virus aid request

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
CARACAS

The International Monetary Fund on Tuesday rejected economically devastated Venezuela's request for a \$5 billion loan to help it cope with the onslaught of COVID-19 on the country that an aid agency warned is as prepared as war-torn Syria.

President Nicolas Maduro made the request earlier on Tuesday but, in a statement hours later, the Washington-based institution indirectly cited a dispute over Mr. Maduro's leadership in denying his petition.

In a letter to IMF chief Kristalina Georgieva, Mr. Maduro said a \$5 billion

loan from the IMF "will contribute significantly to strengthening our detection and response systems."

It was the country's first loan request to the IMF since 2001. "Unfortunately, the Fund is not in a position to consider this request," because there is "no clarity" on international recognition of the country's government, the IMF said.

"IMF engagement with member countries is predicated on official government recognition by the international community, as reflected in the IMF's membership. There is no clarity on recognition at this time," the statement said.

China defends expulsion of scribes, slams U.S. 'prejudice'

Beijing expels all American journalists, says the U.S. is waging an ideological campaign to impose its values

ALEXANDRA STEVENSON
AUSTIN RAMZY
HONG KONG

An increasingly rancorous rivalry between the U.S. and China entered a new phase on Wednesday as Beijing accused the Trump administration of starting a diplomatic clash that led it to expel almost all U.S. journalists from three newspapers.

The Chinese government cast its expulsion of the journalists from *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Washington Post* as necessary to defend Beijing against what it perceived as an ideological campaign by the U.S. to impose its va-



Testing times: Journalists interacting after a briefing by Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang in Beijing. •AP

lues on China. Around a dozen reporters could be required to leave, in a move that Beijing said was reciprocity for the U.S. forcing out

of about 60 Chinese reporters this month.

"The U.S. cannot proceed from ideological prejudice, use its own standards and

likes and dislikes to judge the media of other countries, let alone suppress the Chinese media unreasonably," Geng Shuang, a Foreign Ministry spokesman, said at a news conference in Beijing on Wednesday.

Rising tensions

The expulsions, not seen to such an extent in recent history, point to the governing Communist Party's growing resolve to strike back in all aspects of what is quickly becoming a bare-knuckled competition with the U.S. Over the past year, tensions have escalated over issues ranging from trade deficits to

technological capacity and military dominance, with bruising effect on U.S. and Chinese companies, business executives, and even university students and academics.

The dispute over media access underlines how this new era of great power rivalry has extended into the marketplace of ideas. It not only signals a more muscular approach to foreign policy in China but also accords with the party's tightening grip over information under Xi Jinping, the country's authoritarian leader.

In recent weeks, as the coronavirus spread through

China, the government has cracked down on domestic and foreign reporting, muzzling medical professionals and censoring and removing reports and commentaries online that have challenged the official narrative.

On Tuesday, China went even further, requiring all U.S. journalists for the three newspapers, whose credentials expire by the end of the year, to turn in their press cards within 10 days. It said they cannot continue working as journalists in China. It also said the Americans were forbidden from working as journalists in Macao or Hong Kong. •NY TIMES