

# Italy overtakes China's virus death toll

It records 3,405 deaths against China's 3,245; London faces shutdown, Queen heads for ancient castle

REUTERS  
LONDON/BEIJING

Italy's death toll from the COVID-19 outbreak overtook that of China, where the novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, first emerged, on Thursday, as hospitals said they were being overwhelmed and the government prepared to prolong emergency lockdown measures.

A total of 427 deaths were registered in Italy over the past 24 hours, bringing the total nationwide tally to 3,405 since the outbreak surfaced on February 21. China has recorded 3,245 deaths since early January.

## Limited testing

Officials and experts believe the total number of infections here is significantly higher, with testing largely limited to those arriving for hospital care. The country's large, elderly population, who are particularly vulnerable to the virus, is also seen as a factor for the high number of fatalities.

## COVID-19

"There's a high level of contagion and we're not even counting the dead any more," said Daniela Confalonieri, a nurse in Milan.

Underscoring the scale of the drama, 15 trucks and 50 soldiers were deployed to transport coffins to neighbouring provinces overnight from the northern town of Bergamo, northeast of Milan, whose cemetery has been overwhelmed.

With almost 2,28,000 infections and more than 9,200 deaths, the epidemic has stunned the world and drawn comparisons with painful periods such as Second World War, the 2008 financial crisis and the 1918 Spanish flu.

"This is like an Egyptian plague," said Argentinian hotelier Patricia Duran, who has seen bookings dry up for

her two establishments. "The hotels are empty – tourist activity has died."

Tourism and airlines have been particularly battered, as the world's citizens hunker down to minimise contact and curb the spread of the COVID-19. But few sectors have been spared by a crisis threatening lengthy global recession.

The virus has jumped to 172 other nations and territories with more than 20,000 new cases reported in the past 24 hours – a new daily record. Cases in Germany, Iran and Spain rose to over 12,000 each.

Britain, where death toll has risen to 144, was bracing for the virtual shutdown of London as underground train stations closed and schools prepared to shut their doors on Friday.

Some 20,000 soldiers were on standby. Queen Elizabeth headed for sanctuary in the ancient castle of Windsor, and the Tower of London was to close.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Thursday said Britain hopes to turn the tide on the virus within the next 12 weeks.

"At the moment, the disease is proceeding in a way that does not seem yet to be responding to our interventions," he told a news conference. "I do think, looking at it all, we can turn the tide within the next 12 weeks... but only if we all take the steps that we have outlined."

## Liquidity taps opened

Policymakers in the U.S., Europe and Asia have slashed interest rates and opened liquidity taps to stabilise economies hit by quarantined consumers, broken supply chains, disrupted transport and paralysed businesses.

U.N. chief Antonio Guterres warned that a global recession, "perhaps of record dimensions", was a near certainty.



**Keeping spirits up:** A personal trainer giving out an exercise lesson to her neighbours from her balcony in Rome. Italians cannot leave their homes due to a lockdown. • REUTERS

## Trump defends 'Chinese virus' label

KATIE ROGERS  
LARA JAKES  
WASHINGTON

President Donald Trump on Wednesday defended his increasingly frequent practice of calling the novel coronavirus the "Chinese Virus," ignoring a growing chorus of criticism that it is racist and anti-Chinese.

"It's not racist at all," Mr. Trump said, explaining his rationale. "It comes from China, that's why."

But the term has angered Chinese officials and experts

saying labelling the virus that way will only ratchet up tensions between the two countries while resulting in the kind of xenophobia. Asian Americans have reported incidents of racial slurs and abuse because of the erroneous perception that China is the cause of the virus.

"The use of this term is not only corrosive vis-à-vis a global audience, including here at home; it is also fuelling a narrative in China about a broader American hatred and fear of not just

the Chinese Communist Party but of China and Chinese people in general," said Scott Kennedy, a China expert at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies.

Mr. Trump said that he was attaching "China" to the name of the virus to combat China's disinformation campaign. "I didn't appreciate the fact that China was saying that our military gave it to them," Mr. Trump said. "I think saying that our military gave it to them creates a stigma." NY TIMES

## Spain toll soars nearly 30% to 767

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
MADRID

Spain on Thursday announced that deaths from COVID-19 had jumped by nearly 30% over the past 24 hours to 767. The number of people who have contracted the disease has, meanwhile, grown by around 25% to 17,147.

## U.S. reports 10,491 cases, 150 deaths

REUTERS  
WASHINGTON

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on Thursday reported 10,491 cases of COVID-19, an increase of 3,404 from its previous count, and said the death toll had risen by 53 to 150, the biggest one-day jump so far.

## One person dying every 10 minutes in Iran

REUTERS  
DUBAI

One person dies of COVID-19 every 10 minutes and 50 get infected from the virus in Iran, Health Ministry spokesman Kianush Jahanpur tweeted on Thursday, as the death toll climbed to 1,284, with 149 new deaths in past 24 hours.

## ELSEWHERE



## Pompeo says U.S. citizen detained in Iran freed

WASHINGTON  
U.S. citizen Michael White, who was under detention in Iran since 2018, has been released on Thursday on medical furlough, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said. The U.S. Navy veteran is now in the custody of the Swiss Embassy. "He will undergo medical testing and evaluation," he added. REUTERS

## SpaceX plans first manned flight to space

WASHINGTON  
SpaceX will send astronauts to the International Space Station for the first time in May, NASA said, announcing the first crewed launch from the U.S. to the platform since 2011. Elon Musk's firm will launch a Falcon 9 rocket to transport NASA astronauts in a first for the space agency as it looks to cut costs. AFP

# Sri Lanka parliamentary elections postponed

Government declares 'work from home' week

MEERA SRINIVASAN  
COLOMBO

Sri Lanka's general elections, which was scheduled to be held on April 25, have been postponed in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak.

It was not possible to hold polls amid the coronavirus crisis, Chairman of the Election Commission of Sri Lanka told media persons on Thursday, when the number of positive COVID-19 cases in the island rose to 59.

A new date for the polls will be announced in the coming weeks, officials said. A public holiday has been in force in Sri Lanka this week and on Thursday, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa declared a "work from home" week until March 27 for both, the public sector and the private sector. The mea-



**Operation clean-up:** Sri Lankan government soldiers spraying disinfectant at a railway station in Colombo. • AP

sure, a statement from his office said, sought to prevent congregation of people.

The Tamil National Alliance, the main grouping of parties representing Tamils of the north and east, welcomed the Election Commission's decision to postpone polls in light of the global pandemic that hit Sri

Lanka last month. The TNA, along with several fellow opposition parties, had urged authorities to put off the elections to help the country focus on combating the viral disease.

Sri Lanka has suspended all international flight arrivals until the end of next week.

## U.K. apologises for Windrush scandal

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
LONDON

The British government apologised on Thursday for its treatment of Britons of Caribbean origin, who were wrongly detained or deported for being illegal immigrants, after the publication of a devastating official report.

Their status was regularised in 1971 but few were given any official documentation. Hundreds and potentially thousands were caught up in immigration clampdowns, with 164 people who arrived before 1973 either detained or deported since 2002.

The inquiry found the Home Office had shown "an institutional ignorance" towards the issue of race and the history".

Home Secretary Priti Patel said she was "shocked" by the "terrible injustices" involved.

# China hits a milestone: no new local COVID-19 infection

Government hails the efficacy of its top-down bureaucracy

JAVIER C. HERNÁNDEZ

China on Thursday reported no new local infections for the first time since the COVID-19 crisis began three months ago, reaching a milestone in its battle with the deadly outbreak that has upended daily life and economic activity around the world.

As governments in Italy, the U.S. and elsewhere grapple with the pandemic, China has hailed its success as evidence of what can be achieved when a vast, top-down bureaucracy that brooks no dissent is mobilised in pursuit of a single target.

If Thursday's numbers are more than a statistical blip, it would represent a remarkable turnaround for the Chinese government, which drew widespread public outrage when officials initially concealed and mismanaged the outbreak, even punishing the doctors who sought to raise the alarm.

Those missteps, critics say, allowed the virus to spread uncontrolled across the city of Wuhan in central China, forcing the government to impose draconian travel and quarantine restrictions over hundreds of millions of people that could have been avoided.

While Beijing's sledgehammer approach – seen by many as a brutal experiment unprecedented in size and scope – worked to quickly lower the number of infections, the price in human trauma and economic loss was severe.

And China is not out of danger from a revived contagion and instability. A vast swath of the country's populace has been embittered by how the ruling Communist Party has handled the scourge. Questions have been raised about the accu-



**Safe zone:** Medical practitioners embracing as they prepare to leave Wuhan for their homes on Thursday. • AFP

racy of China's statistics. And even if zero local infections has been achieved, that does not mean zero new cases.

Officials said on Thursday that 34 new cases had been confirmed among people who had arrived from elsewhere, pointing to how difficult it will likely be for China – or any country – to keep the virus completely out.

Within China, many provinces and cities have essentially shut themselves off to travellers, raising the question of whether the virus will re-emerge once such barriers are lifted and people begin criss-crossing the country again.

## Fear of a second wave

"It's very clear that the actions taken in China have almost brought to an end their first wave of infections," said Ben Cowling, the head of the division of epidemiology and biostatistics at Hong Kong University's School of Public Health.

"The question is what will happen if there's a second wave because the kind of measures that China has implemented are not necessarily sustainable in the long term."

China's leader, Xi Jinping,

had called for a "people's war" against the epidemic, and the party's propaganda outlets have in recent weeks hailed the party's response as a success and a model for other countries.

## At what cost?

The party's approach has also come at a great cost to civil liberties and economic livelihoods, and some critics have questioned whether it would be viable in open societies where personal freedoms are fiercely protected.

In recent days, fear of the virus and pressure from the public to take stronger measures has pushed democratic governments such as Italy, Spain and France to impose stringent lockdowns on citizens, strategies that some countries were hesitant to adopt just weeks ago.

The longer-term effects of such policies have been particularly evident in Wuhan and Hubei province, where more than 50 million people have been subject to severe restraints since late January. For weeks, hospitals were overwhelmed and medical workers lacked basic supplies and protective gear. Residents protested over food shortages. Critically ill patients struggled to find timely care. Many died. NY TIMES

# After 20 years in power, Putin says he's not a 'Tsar'

I don't reign. I work every day, says Russian President

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
MOSCOW

Russian President Vladimir Putin dismissed comparisons to a Tsar on Thursday, arguing he "works every day" and listens to what people want.

"Well, this is not true," Mr. Putin said when asked about being described as a Russian imperial-era ruler.

"Maybe someone else can be called a Tsar. But in my case, I don't reign, I work every day," he told the state-run TASS news agency.

The interview aired on Thursday as part of a series rolled out by TASS this month to mark 20 years since the 67-year-old President, took the helm of Russian politics.

It was not clear when the segments were recorded,



Vladimir Putin

but the series began airing before Mr. Putin said this month that he wants an opportunity to run for president again, as part of his constitutional reforms.

The reforms proposed in January include granting more power to Parliament and strengthening the role of the State Council.

An amendment approved last week would allow Mr. Putin to run for another six years in the Kremlin in 2024 and again in 2030. The reforms will be subject to a public vote.

When asked what he foresees past 2024, Mr. Putin deferred to the perspective of "people's sentiments... what they want."

"The primary source of power is the people," he said. "It's very important for me to feel and understand what people want."

"A Tsar is one who just sits there, looks down from above and says: 'They will do as I order,' while he just tries on a cap and looks at himself in the mirror," Mr. Putin said.

"On the contrary, I work every day."

# Losses leave Sanders with no realistic path to nomination

Joe Biden has now amassed a huge lead in delegates needed to clinch the nomination after winning the Arizona, Florida and Illinois primaries

SYDNEY EMBER  
REID J. EPSTEIN

Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont was reassessing the future of his presidential bid on Wednesday after a crushing round of primary losses left him with no realistic path to the Democratic nomination and the 2020 race itself was on hold because of the coronavirus outbreak.

Mr. Sanders' campaign has stopped actively advertising on Facebook, and his campaign manager sent an email to supporters without asking for donations – the kind of steps that sometimes precede the end of campaigns. His aides say Mr. Sanders is not suspending his bid, even as some Democrats

have become increasingly vocal that he should consider leaving the race.

The party's front-runner, Joe Biden, has now amassed a nearly insurmountable lead in delegates needed to clinch the nomination after winning the Arizona, Florida and Illinois primaries on Tuesday. Mr. Biden has swept so many States and attracted so many demographic groups that Mr. Sanders has little left to go on besides his political message and his passionate base of liberal supporters.

Some Democrats said that with the delegate outlook so bleak, and with a deadly pandemic gripping an anxious nation, Mr. Sanders risks ap-

pearing self-centred and out of step if he insists on pressing ahead.

"Bernie is getting beat by 30 and 40 points – it's over," said Rep. Don Beyer of Virginia, who has endorsed Mr. Biden. "This is the adult thing to do – knowing when it is time to disappear."

Mr. Sanders, who has not said when he will make an announcement about his future, was testy on Wednesday when asked by a CNN reporter about his plans, suggesting his sole focus should be on the virus.

"I'm dealing with a global crisis," he said at the Capitol. "You know, we're dealing with it, and you're asking me these questions."



**Losing ground:** Senator Bernie Sanders leaving the U.S. Capitol in Washington on Thursday. • REUTERS

"Right now, I'm trying to do my best to make sure that we don't have an economic meltdown and that people don't die," he added. "Is that enough for you to keep me busy for today?"

Some Democrats said Mr. Sanders had already accomplished a great deal by promoting his liberal policy agenda. Yet they warned that staying in the race could damage the coalition he has

built since 2015.

"It's time to throw in the towel knowing that he has won the battle of issues," said Wilbur Colom, a Democratic National Committee member from Mississippi who formerly supported Michael Bloomberg. "The Democratic Party has moved within inches of his revolution on all major issues."

Yet 26 States, territories and the District of Columbia have yet to hold primaries and caucuses, and there are still 1,399 delegates left to be awarded. With the primary season essentially on hold because of public health concerns, it could be at least two months before Mr. Biden accumulates enough to secure

the nomination. DNC rules require a presidential nominee to accrue 1,991 delegates, and Mr. Biden cannot win those delegates if States don't hold their primaries.

But if Mr. Sanders does quit, Mr. Biden would be free to move on to focus on the general election, President Donald Trump and the national challenges posed by the virus.

"Bernie is not running a campaign so much as leading a movement," said Winston Apple, a DNC member from Missouri who supports Sanders. "He will be a more effective leader for our movement if he remains in contention throughout the process." NY TIMES

## Tulsi Gabbard quits race, backs Biden

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
WASHINGTON

U.S. Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard dropped out of the Democratic presidential nomination race on Thursday and endorsed rival Joe Biden as flag bearer in the election against President Donald Trump.

"Today, I'm suspending my presidential campaign and offering my full support to Vice-President Joe Biden in his quest to bring our country together," the lawmaker said. "Although I may not agree with the V-P on every issue, I know that he has a good heart, and he is motivated by his love for our country and the American people."