

PANDEMIC WATCH



Yuval Noah Harari

ISRAEL

Harari criticised for dictatorship remark

Jerusalem: Noted Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari, who accused Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of imposing 'coronavirus dictatorship' referring to measures that have put the country in a near shutdown mode, has evoked sharp rebuke from Netanyahu's son, Yair, who said "clever professors can be stupid about politics". Netanyahu has copped criticism for allegedly exploiting the coronavirus outbreak to trample democratic institutions. Harari on Thursday tweeted "coronavirus has killed democracy" in Hebrew and "the first coronavirus dictatorship" in English.

SINGAPORE

40 new cases flagged, total count now 385

Singapore: Singapore on Friday confirmed 40 new coronavirus cases, including 30 imported infections, taking the total cases to 385. Many of the imported cases had travelled to the UK, followed by Indonesia and the US, said the Health Ministry. Of the 30 imported cases, 22 are Singapore citizens or permanent residents. Seven others have long-term passes while one of the new patients has a short-term visit pass. The 10 remaining infections are local cases, the ministry said. All events and gatherings with 250 or more people must be suspended, said the ministry.

PRAGUE

Chinese plane with a million masks lands

Prague: A plane from China carrying more than one million face masks for the Czech Republic landed in Prague on Friday, the government said. The Czech government has come under fire over a shortage of medical material which has led thousands of Czechs to make face masks at home as the state banned people from leaving home without their noses and mouths covered. "The plane behind us contains 1.1 million FFP2 respirators which will be distributed immediately to hospitals..." Interior Minister Jan Hamacek said.

AUSTRALIA

Death toll reaches 7

Melbourne: An 81-year-old woman died in Australia's New South Wales after contracting coronavirus, becoming the seventh victim in the country as the confirmed COVID-19 cases jumped to 785, health officials said on Friday. Prime Minister Scott Morrison on Thursday announced closing borders to all non-citizens and non-residents. "The entry ban takes effect from Friday, March 20, 2020, at 9 PM (local time) with exemptions only for Australian citizens, permanent residents and their immediate family including spouses, legal guardians and dependants," he said.

Toll rises: 11,000 dead, 250,000 cases

In 'unprecedented measure', UK to pay workers' wages as economy shuts down

REUTERS & PTI LONDON, MARCH 20

UK CHANCELLOR of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak, who had pledged to do "whatever it takes" to save people's jobs and livelihoods through the coronavirus pandemic, on Friday unveiled an "unprecedented" wage boost to his COVID-19 rescue package. Britain's Indian-origin finance minister announced that the UK government would pay 80 per cent of wages for employees not working, up to 2,500 pounds a month.



When this is over, and it will be over, and remember the many small acts of kindness done by us and to us. We want to look back on this time and remember how we thought first of others and acted with decency."

RISHI SUNAK CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER

"Today I can announce for the first time in our history the government is going to step in and pay people's wages," he said, addressing the daily Downing Street briefing alongside British Prime Minister Boris Johnson. "We said we would stand together with the British people and we meant it," he said.

He described the government's planned economic response as the most "comprehensive" in the world.

He said: "I know that people are worried about losing their jobs, about not being able to pay the rent or mortgage, about not having enough set by for food and bills. I know that some people in the last few days have already lost their jobs. You will not face this alone. But getting through this will require a collective national effort."

Speaking directly to businesses, he added: "The government is doing its best to stand

behind you and I'm asking you to do your best to stand behind our workers..."

Moments earlier, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson told cafes, pubs and restaurants across the country to close on Friday night and to stay shut indefinitely to help slow the spread of the coronavirus.

"We are telling cafes, bars and restaurants to close tonight as soon as they reasonably can and not to open tomorrow," Johnson told reporters in Downing Street.

Another 39 people have died in England after testing positive for the coronavirus, bringing the total number of confirmed deaths to 167, the National Health Service said Friday.



DISINFECTION DRIVE: Spanish Emergency Army Unit soldiers disinfect terminals at the airport in Barcelona, Spain. AP

Italy records 627 deaths in a day, taking total toll past 4,000; in Spain, 235 dead

AGENCIES MARCH 20

THE DEATH toll from an outbreak of coronavirus in Italy has leapt by 627 to 4,032, officials said on Friday, an increase of 18.4% — by far the largest daily rise in absolute terms since the contagion emerged a month ago.

The death toll rose to 1,002 in Spain on Friday after 235 people died in 24 hours, and the number of cases approached 20,000, the health ministry said.

There have been at least 256,296 infections reported in 163 countries and territories, and 11,015 deaths.

Explained: Testing limited, 'real figures' may be higher

EVEN AS the death tolls and cases in Europe continue to grow, limited testing suggests that the "real numbers" could be much higher. Reports from Italy, Spain and other countries suggest that the capacity for testing is yet to catch up with suspected cases. Thus, many cases — and deaths — caused by the virus are yet to be classified as such. This, experts said, highlighted the need for more testing, in order to be better equipped to understand and combat the pandemic.

On Thursday, Italy overtook China as the country to register most deaths from the highly contagious virus. Until Friday,

Italy had never recorded more than 475 deaths in a single day. The total number of cases in Italy rose to 47,021 from a previ-

ous 41,035, an increase of 14.6%, the Civil Protection Agency said.

The spiralling number of infections has propelled Spain into the top four worst-hit countries in the world — with the figures growing as the country steps up its capacity for testing.

Since the last update around midday on Thursday, another 2,833 infections have been confirmed, taking the overall number of cases to 19,980, the ministry's emergencies coordinator Fernando Simon said.

But he said it was "very likely that the figures underestimated the overall number" of people with the virus, saying the testing laboratories were "overwhelmed".

Nepal orders shutdown, India offers to send specialist team

YUBARAJ GHIMIRE KATHMANDU, MARCH 20

EVEN AS Nepal gears up to combat COVID-19 by restricting people's movements and shutting down almost all government offices, India offered to send a Rapid Response Team comprising doctors and specialists.

Although the country has not flagged a confirmed COVID-19 case so far, the Nepal government has suspended all international flights except from India, Singapore and Thailand, effective from midnight, for 10 days. It also decided to shut down all government offices, as well as the judiciary, for the same period. The government has declared a ban on entry of people of all nationalities, including Nepalis living abroad, inside the country.

Nepal's Foreign Minister Pradeep Gyawal on Friday thanked his Indian counterpart, S Jaishankar, for the Indian offer to send a Rapid Response team.

A government press release said the two sides agreed to maintain a smooth supply of goods and medical items, coupled with effective surveillance at borders, to minimise the risk and vulnerabilities associated with COVID-19.

NEW YORK, CALIFORNIA LOCK DOWN

US, Mexico close borders to non-essential travel

NEW YORK TIMES MARCH 20

AT A White House briefing on Friday, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that border closures to non-essential travelers from Canada and Mexico would go into effect at midnight on Saturday.

Pompeo also reiterated that the State Department had implemented a Level 4 travel advisory warning Americans against traveling abroad. He said US citizens "should arrange immediate return" unless they intend to remain abroad for an extended time. "If you choose to travel, it may well be fairly disruptive," he said.

President Trump suggested that immigration would strain health care systems. "During a global pandemic they threaten to create a public storm that would spread the infection to our border agents, migrants and the public at large," Trump said, referring to people seeking to enter the country.

Dr Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said that there was a "fundamental public health reason" for closing the northern and southern borders.



Chinatown, in New York, nearly deserted. Reuters

"Understand that: There's a public health reason for doing that." Governor Andrew M Cuomo told New Yorkers to stay indoors as much as possible and ordered all nonessential businesses to keep all their workers home in a wide-ranging executive order, as the number of confirmed coronavirus cases in the state jumped to over 7,000.

California extended its "shelter in place" orders to all 40 million residents of the state, saying people should leave their homes only for essential business.

The State Department warned Americans not to leave the country, and said that citizens who are already abroad should either return home or stay where they are.

TWO STATES, TWO LOCKDOWNS

CALIFORNIA

Residents asked to head out only for essential reasons

500 National Guard troops to help distribute food, supplies

Trump asked to dock Navy's 1,000-patient Mercy ship in the port of Los Angeles

NEW YORK

Non-essential businesses closed, gatherings banned

Civil fines to be handed out to anyone violating quarantine

People asked to exercise alone, avoid public transport unless 'urgent, necessary'

149 more dead in Iran, leaders strike upbeat tone

REUTERS & PTI DUBAI, TEHRAN, MARCH 20

IRAN'S SUPREME Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, in a speech on state television for the Persian New Year, praised Iranians for their "dazzling" sacrifices in fighting the coronavirus outbreak in the worst-hit country in the Middle East.

The country's leaders on Friday announced 149 more fatalities, bringing its death toll to 1,433 amid nearly 20,000 confirmed cases. It has been widely criticised for its slow response.

Khamenei, Iran's highest authority, said it had been a tumultuous year for Iranians who have endured US sanctions, floods, and the coronavirus.

"These acts of sacrifice were made by medical groups, physicians, nurses, assistants, managers and the staff working in hospitals," said Khamenei, who looked healthy despite rumours that he had been infected with the new coronavirus.

Officials close to Khamenei, contacted by Reuters on Wednesday, denied the rumours.

Nowruz is an ancient celebration and the most important date in the calendar, when families gather and exchange gifts. But the coronavirus has overshadowed the celebrations.

"Last year was a tumultuous year for the Iranian nation," Khamenei said. "It was a year that began with the floods and that ended with the coronavirus...but we will overcome all hardships with unity."

Trump trying to shift blame, says China

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA BEIJING, MARCH 20

BEIJING ACCUSED US President Donald Trump on Friday of trying to "shift the blame" for the global coronavirus pandemic in an escalating row between the two powers.

Trump charged Thursday that the world is "paying a big price" for China's lack of transparency on the outbreak when it emerged in the central city of Wuhan late last year. "Some people on the US side are trying to stigmatise China's fight against the epidemic, and shift the blame onto China," foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said.

"This approach ignores the great sacrifice made by the Chinese people to safeguard the health and safety of humankind, and slanders China's major contribution to global public health."

Beijing also said Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was "lying through (his) teeth".

In an interview on Fox News, Pompeo said Beijing "wasted valuable days" after identifying the coronavirus by letting "hundreds of thousands" leave the epicentre of Wuhan.

Pakistan flags third death as cases jump to 464

SAJJAD HUSSAIN ISLAMABAD, MARCH 20

PAKISTAN PRIME Minister Imran Khan on Friday asked people to self-quarantine for at least another 45 days as the country reported its third coronavirus death and the total number of confirmed cases rose to 464.

The third death was reported from Sindh Province where the number of confirmed cases rose to 238, according to provincial spokesman Murtaza Wahab.

Already two patients died in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa where the number of positive cases has increased to 23, provincial health

minister Taimur Jhagra said.

At least 16 more cases were reported in Punjab where the tally touched 96, according to a notification issued by the provincial health department spokesperson Qaiser Asif.

Prime Minister Khan said in Islamabad on Friday that people should self-quarantine for at least another 45 days.

Khan said, "Our strategy is a little different from a complete lockdown, considering Pakistan's socio-economic realities". "Pakistan isn't a rich country like Italy, where people can get through a sustained period without economic activity," he was quoted as saying by Express Tribune. PTI

IN SYRIA, THE VIRUS MAY ALREADY BE SPREADING IN PACKED DISPLACEMENT CAMPS

'Wash our hands? Some people can't wash their kids for a week'

EVAN HILL & YOUSURAL-HLOU MAARAT MISRIN, MARCH 20

IN NORTHWESTERN Syria, where 1 million people who have fled the civil war are sheltering in muddy tent camps and abandoned buildings, the spread of the coronavirus could wreak untold disaster on a devastated region.

Forget hand washing and social distancing, the preventive measures recommended by health authorities around the world. There is little to no running water in the camps, and up

to a dozen people often live in the same tent.

"You want us to wash our hands?" asked Fadi Mesaher, the Idlib director for the Maram Foundation for Relief and Development. "Some people can't wash their kids for a week. They are living outdoors."

Syrian doctors believe the virus has already swept into the camps, with deaths and illness that bear the hallmarks of the outbreak. But the international response has been slow to non-existent, according to more than a dozen experts and Syrian medical professionals.



A COVID-19 training session for nurses, ambulance drivers. NYT

The World Health Organisation has not yet delivered coronavirus testing kits to the opposition-held northwest, despite making its first delivery of such kits to the Syrian government more than a month ago.

"We currently have cases that are similar, and we've had people die," said Dr. Mohamed Ghaleb Tennari, who manages the Syrian American Medical Society's hospitals in the region. "But unfortunately because we don't have the test, we can't confirm that these cases are truly corona or not."

In Idlib City, a lab at Idlib Central Hospital is ready to test

for the coronavirus but lacks the test kits, said Dr. Naser Almhawish, the surveillance coordinator for the Early Warning Alert and Response Network of the Assistance Coordination Unit, an independent group.

Syrian doctors have asked for more protective equipment, like masks and gloves, but the first new shipment from the WHO arrived Tuesday. "Unfortunately, we don't have areas of quarantine available in north Syria," said Abd al-Razzaq Zaqqouq, a media assistant for the Syrian American Medical Society at the hospital. "If there is any case of corona in north

Syria, the situation will be tragic." Doctors in the region estimate that 1 million people in Idlib province could contract the virus, that 100,000 to 120,000 could die, and that 10,000 will need the help of ventilators. There are 153 ventilators in the province now.

"You may have seen countries like Italy and China — countries that have a quarantine system — and even they couldn't handle the pressure of all of these cases," Tennari said. "Imagine, then — we're in a state of war, and we don't have a proper health care system. It's crippled." NYT