

Italy's toll hits another one-day record

Country adds 627 fatalities; Wuhan reports no new cases for first time since COVID-19 outbreak began

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
GENEVA

Italy reported a dramatic surge in coronavirus (COVID-19) deaths on Friday as the pandemic spread further across the planet, but Wuhan in China reported no new cases, sparking a glimmer of hope. Worldwide fatalities from the pandemic swept past 10,000, with the number of infected people topping 2,50,000, according to an AFP tally.

Italy, already the worst-affected country in the world, added another 627 fatalities, taking its reported total past 4,000 despite government efforts to stem the pandemic's spread.

36.6% of deaths

The nation of 60 million now accounts for 36.6% of the world's COVID-19 deaths.

Governments and central banks continued to throw unprecedented sums of money into the economic battle, hoping against hope that a deep global recession could somehow be dodged.

COVID-19

In a rare incident of encouraging news Wuhan, the Chinese city where the new coronavirus first emerged in December, reported no new cases in 24 hours. "Wuhan provides hope for the rest of the world that even the most severe situation can be turned around", World Health Organization chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told a virtual news conference. But hours earlier, California, among the worst hit State in the United States, told its 40 million residents to stay at home, the most drastic move yet in the U.S.

The California measures will, however, not be en-



In emergency gear: Members of Spain's Military Emergencies Unit disinfecting the Josep Tarradellas Barcelona-El Prat airport. •AFP

forced by police, unlike in France, Italy, Spain and other European countries where people face fines if they break the rules. Britain, meanwhile, ditched its more relaxed attitude on Friday, telling cafes, pubs, bars, restaurants, nightclubs, theatres and leisure centres to close.

Germany's biggest State Bavaria on Friday became the first region in the country to order a lockdown, imposing "fundamental restrictions" on going out for two weeks. The strict measures follow the template set by China, as a lockdown imposed in Hubei province, where the virus first emerged, appeared to have paid off. Italy, which has seen more than 1,500 fatalities in the past three days alone, has now recorded the five highest one-day tolls officially registered around the world and a total of 4,032.

China's death count was steady at 3,248, according to the AFP tally of official data.

Europe now accounts for more than half of the fatalities linked to the COVID-19 disease around the world.

U.S. suspends visa services

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
WASHINGTON

The United States said on Friday that it was suspending all routine visa services around the world due to the global COVID-19 pandemic.

U.S. embassies and consulates will still consider emergency visas if they have adequate staff, the State Department said. "In response to significant worldwide challenges related to the CO-

VID-19 pandemic, the Department of State is temporarily suspending routine visa services at all U.S. embassies and consulates," a travel advisory said.

The State Department had already said it was suspending visa issuance at most posts overseas. But Friday's order was global and, while temporary, there was no date set for services to resume.

Iran vows to defeat virus

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
TEHRAN

Iran's Supreme Leader and President promised on Friday that the country would overcome one of the world's deadliest viral outbreaks just as it had faced down sweeping U.S. sanctions.

In messages marking the Persian New Year holiday Nowruz, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Hassan Rouhani both acknowledged that the past year had been

difficult. Ayatollah Khamenei paid tribute to the sacrifices of the country's doctors and nurses in tackling the virus, which has infected at least 18,407 people in Iran and killed 1,284, according to an official tally.

In his message to Iranians, broadcast shortly after the Supreme Leader's, Mr. Rouhani trumpeted Iran's success in withstanding U.S. sanctions on the country's vital oil sector.

Over 1,000 dead in Spain

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
MADRID

The COVID-19 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. The spiralling number of infections has propelled Spain into the top four worst-hit countries in the world.

Pakistan reports third death

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
ISLAMABAD

Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan on Friday asked people to self-quarantine for at least another 45 days as the country reported its third COVID-19 death and the total number of cases rose to 464. The third death was reported from Sindh — where the number of cases rose to 238, according to provincial spokesman Murtaza Wahab.

Malaysia Army to enforce curbs

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
KUALA LUMPUR

Malaysia will deploy the Army to support police in enforcing tough

restrictions to halt the spread of the COVID-19, Defence Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob said on Friday. The country reported 130 new cases on Friday, taking its toll to 1,030, the highest for any Southeast Asian country.

China says Trump is trying to 'shift blame' for pandemic

U.S. President had slammed Beijing's 'lack of transparency'

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BEIJING

Beijing accused U.S. President Donald Trump on Friday of trying to "shift the blame" for the global coronavirus pandemic in an escalating row between the two powers.

Mr. Trump charged on 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.

China has been criticised for suppressing information and punishing whistleblowers during the early stages of the contagion, which has

killed more than 10,000 people. "Some people on the U.S. side are trying to stigmatise China's fight against the epidemic, and shift the blame onto China," Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said.

Great sacrifice

"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."

Mr. Geng said China has shared data with the U.S. throughout the health crisis. The exchange marked an

escalation in the bitter war of words between China and the U.S. over the past week.

China's announcement this week of mass expulsions of American journalists sparked a media freedom row that coincided with Mr. Trump's ramped-up usage of the term "Chinese Virus", which he claimed was in response to Chinese misinformation suggesting that the virus originated in the U.S.

In recent days, Chinese state media has been heavily critical of Mr. Trump.

Mr. Trump, on his part, has defended his description of the virus, saying it was "not racist at all".

Virus kills priests who bless the dying

10 clergymen have succumbed in Italy's Bergamo diocese

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
ROME

They come to bless those suffering the most from the virus. And then, more and more often, Italy's priests die themselves. The diocese of Bergamo northeast of Milan appears to have been ravaged the most by the stealth killer. At least 10 of its priests have died of COVID-19, the Catholic daily *Avvenire* reported Thursday.

The deaths, whether of priests or members of their communities, are "so numerous that it is difficult to count", the paper wrote.

Five more fatalities were registered in the city of Parma. Still more virus-related deaths emerged among priests in Brescia, Cremona and the northern industrial hub of Milan itself.

All these parishes are clustered in Italy's north, the



A priest in the Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere. •REUTERS

viruses target from the day the Catholic country's first death was reported four weeks ago.

Like doctors, Italy's priests come in contact with the disease's most serious cases. And like doctors, priests are known to congregate among themselves in close quarters, creating the

perfect conditions for contagion.

A count by Italy's ANSA news agency on Thursday put the number of medics killed by the disease at 13.

Figures reported by Italian media suggest the death toll among priests is higher. At least 18 priests have been reported killed.

Sri Lanka declares curfew

MEERA SRINIVASAN
COLOMBO

The Presidential Secretariat on Friday announced an island-wide curfew, to be enforced until Monday morning, in a bid to enhance Sri Lanka's response to the COVID-19 outbreak that has so far infected 70 persons. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa has asked public and private sector to "work from home" next week, while all educational institutions remain closed.

Meanwhile, police arrested the Mayor of Dambulla town, in the Central Province, for organising a public even amid a public health crisis.

The Mayor had organised the race to celebrate the annual harvest festival, local media reports said.

The police had earlier restricted the curfew to night time in the western coastal areas.

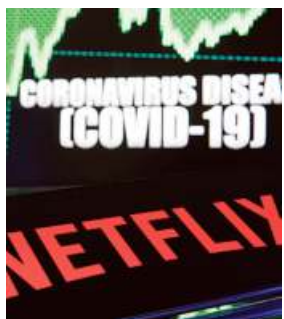
Netflix, YouTube reduce image quality in Europe

This is to ease pressure on the Internet

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BRUSSELS

Netflix and YouTube will reduce the default image quality of streaming video in Europe to ease pressure on the Internet, the firms said on Friday, as demand soars with millions confined to their homes over COVID-19 fears. EU Commissioner for the Digital Economy Thierry Breton urged Internet giants to switch from high definition to the former standard definition.

Late on Thursday, entertainment platform Netflix agreed, and on Friday Google's video-sharing service YouTube said it would follow suit. "Following the discussion between Google's CEO, Sundar Pichai, YouTube's CEO Susan Wojcicki and Commissioner Thierry Breton we are making a commitment to temporarily switch all traffic in the EU to



Standard Definition by default," said a Google spokesperson.

Separately, Netflix will "begin reducing bit rates across all our streams in Europe for 30 days," a spokesperson for the streaming giant said in a statement.

"We estimate that this will reduce Netflix traffic on European networks by around 25% while also ensuring a good quality service for our members," the statement added.

Trump to host G7 meet via videoconference

It was scheduled to be held at Camp David this year in April-May

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
WASHINGTON

President Donald Trump is scrapping this year's G7 summit at Camp David near Washington due to the COVID-19 crisis and will instead hold the event by videoconference, the White House said on Thursday.

The United States heads the group of seven wealthy democracies in 2020 and Mr. Trump had been due to host fellow leaders at the presidential retreat known as Camp David in June.

Responding to COVID-19

Instead, the summit will now take place remotely "in order for each country to focus all of its resources on responding to the health and economic challenges of COVID-19," White House spokesman Judd Deere said.

Mr. Trump's national economic director Larry Kudlow, who is the U.S. pointman for the summit,



Crisis meet: U.S. President Donald Trump at a teleconference with State Governors at the Federal Emergency Management Agency headquarters, in Washington on Thursday. •AFP

informed his counterparts of the decision, Mr. Deere said in a statement.

"The White House also informed the other G7 members that in order to continue close coordination, the President will convene the leaders via video teleconference in April and May just as he did this week," he said.

In a call between Mr. Trump and France's Presi-

dent Emmanuel Macron on Thursday, they agreed "to continue close cooperation on resolving the pandemic and minimising its economic impact, in coordination with the G7 and other international partners," the White House said separately.

G7 countries — Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the United States — are all in crisis mode

to stop the spread of the virus and equally to try and halt financial panic that threatens to send their economies into recession.

Controversy over venue

The G7 summit is held by the presiding country each year, but Mr. Trump's preparations had already been marred by controversy over his initial attempt to host the event at his own golf club in Florida. Last October, the White House announced that the Trump National Doral Golf Club near Miami had been chosen out of 12 possible sites. The White House insisted there was no conflict of interest in using a Trump business and claimed there was no equally suitable property in the country.

Following strong resistance in Congress, Mr. Trump switched tack in December, saying he could use Camp David, a historic presidential retreat, instead.

Pak. doctor, off to join IS, arrested in U.S.

Muhammad Masood was planning to travel to West Asia by cargo ship

NEIL VIGDOR

A Pakistani doctor who the FBI said was intent on joining the Islamic State (IS), either on the battlefield in Syria or as a "lone wolf" in the U.S., was arrested on Thursday before boarding a flight at Minneapolis-St. Paul Airport.

The doctor, Muhammad Masood, 28, had been en route to Los Angeles to try to travel to West Asia by cargo ship, the authorities said. He had initially bought a plane ticket from Chicago to Jordan, but officials said the flight was cancelled because of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Masood, who most recently worked as a research coordinator at a medical clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, was charged with one count of attempting to provide material support to a



IS was here: A faded flag of the Islamic State in Raqqa, Syria, the terror outfit's former capital. •NYT

designated foreign terrorist organisation.

The charge carries a penalty of up to 20 years in prison.

Social media post

Masood spent the past two years in the U.S. on a temporary visa, known as a H-1B, that is issued to skilled

workers from abroad, a criminal affidavit said.

Law enforcement officials said they began their investigation of Masood in January, after he posted on an encrypted social media platform asking for help making "hijrah", the Arabic word for migration. The FBI said the word was widely used by

those seeking to join the Islamic State group.

Masood then used the same social media platform to correspond with two informants about his plans, according to the affidavit. He told one, "I want to fight on the front line as well as help the wounded brothers," Carson Green, an FBI special agent, wrote in the affidavit.

Masood was kept in custody after a brief appearance in U.S. District Court in Minneapolis on Thursday.

Manny Atwal, an assistant federal public defender who accompanied Masood in court, said in an email on Thursday that he could not comment on the case.

In a message exchange, Masood told one of the informants that, as a doctor, "I want to help mujahideen on the ground," Mr. Green wrote in the affidavit.

24 killed in Afghan insider attack

Pre-dawn raid targets joint police and army headquarters

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
KABUL

At least two dozen Afghan security forces were killed on Friday in an insider attack on their base in southern Afghanistan, officials said, as fighting raged in the war-weary country while efforts to start talks with the Taliban stalled.

The pre-dawn attack in Zabul province comes as Afghanistan is grappling with several crises including an increase in Taliban violence that has thrown a supposed peace process into turmoil, mounting COVID-19 cases, and a political feud that has seen two men claim the presidency.

The attack in Zabul saw several "infiltrators" open fire on their comrades as they slept, according to provincial Governor Rahmatullah Yarmal, in one of the

deadliest attacks since the U.S. signed a withdrawal deal with the Taliban last month.

The pre-dawn raid targeted a joint police and army headquarters near Qalat, the provincial capital. "In the attack, 14 Afghan Army forces and 10 policemen were killed," Zabul provincial council chief Ata Jan Haq Bayan said.

Connection with Taliban

He added that four other Afghan service members were missing. "The attackers had connections with the Taliban insurgents," Mr. Bayan said. They fled in two military Humvee vehicles, along with a pickup truck, weapons and ammunition. Mr. Yarmal confirmed the toll.

Hours after the incident the Defence Ministry vowed to retaliate, while also giving

a lower death toll for the attack, saying just 17 were killed.

The Afghan security forces "will not leave this attack unanswered and will avenge the blood of the martyrs" the Ministry added in a statement. The U.S. embassy later condemned the attack on Twitter, saying "the time for peace is now".

Zabul province, bordering Pakistan, has long been an insurgent stronghold and was the holdout for former Taliban supreme leader Mullah Omar, who died in 2013.

The Zabul attack comes just a day after Afghan Defence Minister Asadullah Khalid called on the Taliban to commit to a ceasefire as a way of tackling COVID-19, which observers fear is spreading unchecked through the impoverished country.

23 Iranian prisoners escape on Nowruz eve

TEHRAN
Twenty-three inmates escaped from an Iranian prison while guards were making preparations for a Persian New Year amnesty, state news agency IRNA reported on Friday. It said the detainees escaped overnight from a facility in the western city of Khorramabad, the capital of Lorestan province, just hours before the start of Nowruz. AFP

Greece arrests Turkish 'far-left extremists'

ATHENS
Greek police on Friday said 11 people had been arrested as suspected members of a Turkish far-left extremist group after a raid on hideouts found heavy weaponry in a tunnel. A police statement said the "foreign" suspects will be arraigned as members of the Revolutionary People's Liberation Army-Front, a far-left group in Turkey. AFP