

Nearly 1 bn people confined to homes

COVID-19 death toll crosses 11,000 worldwide; More U.S. States order residents to stay home

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
NEW YORK

Close to one billion people worldwide were confined to their homes on Saturday as the global COVID-19 death toll shot past 11,000 and U.S. States rolled out lockdown measures already imposed across swathes of Europe.

The pandemic has completely upended lives across the planet, restricting movement, shutting schools and forcing millions to work from home. While President Donald Trump insisted the U.S. was "winning" the war against the virus, individual States dramatically ramped up restrictions, with New York and Illinois joining California in ordering residents to stay home.

The virus death toll

COVID-19

surged past 11,000 worldwide, with 4,000 alone in worst-hit Italy where the daily number of fatalities has shot up relentlessly over the past week. An estimated 900 million people are now confined to their homes in 35 countries around the world — including 600 million hemmed in by obligatory government lockdown orders — according to an AFP tally.

Message for the youth

While the elderly and those with pre-existing medical conditions are the hardest hit by the virus, the World Health Organization warned that young people were also vulnerable. "Today, I have a message for young people: you are not invincible. This virus could put you in hospital for weeks — or even kill you," WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said. "Even if you don't get sick, the choices you make about

where you go could be the difference between life and death for someone else."

Italy reported its worst single day death toll on Friday, adding another 627 fatalities and taking its reported total to 4,032 despite efforts to stem the spread.

The nation of 60 million now accounts for 36% of the world's COVID-19 deaths and its death rate of 8.6% among confirmed infections is significantly higher than that in most other countries.

France, Italy, Spain and other European countries have ordered people to stay at home, threatening fines in some cases, while Bavaria became the first region in Germany to order a lockdown. Britain also announced restrictions, telling pubs, restaurants and theatres to close.

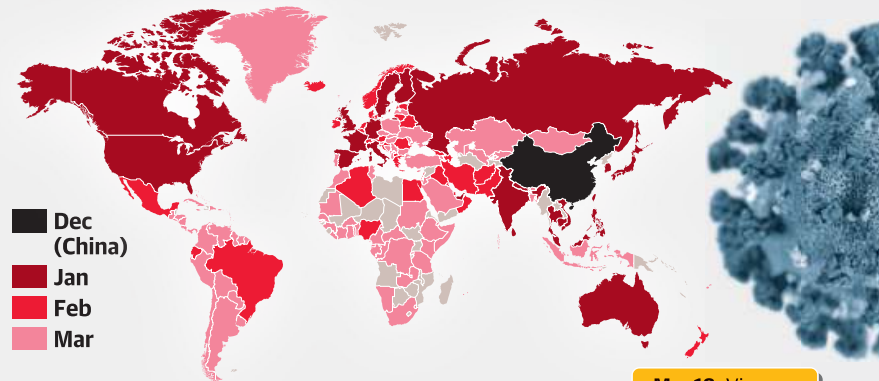
With the virus fears gripping the U.S., its largest State California — with over 1,000 cases and 19 deaths — told its 40 million residents to stay at home. New York State, which has reported over 7,000 cases and 39 deaths, followed suit on Friday, ordering its nearly 20 million residents to do the same from Sunday evening.

Mr. Trump applauded the New York and California decisions, but said he did not think a nationwide lockdown was needed. "Those are really two hotbeds," he said. "I don't think we'll ever find (a U.S.-wide lockdown) necessary." Shortly after the President spoke, the Governor of Illinois ordered residents of the State to stay at home and the Connecticut Governor did the same. The restrictions so far imposed in seven States cover around 100 million people, with the U.S.'s three most populous cities — New York, Los Angeles and Chicago — under lockdown.

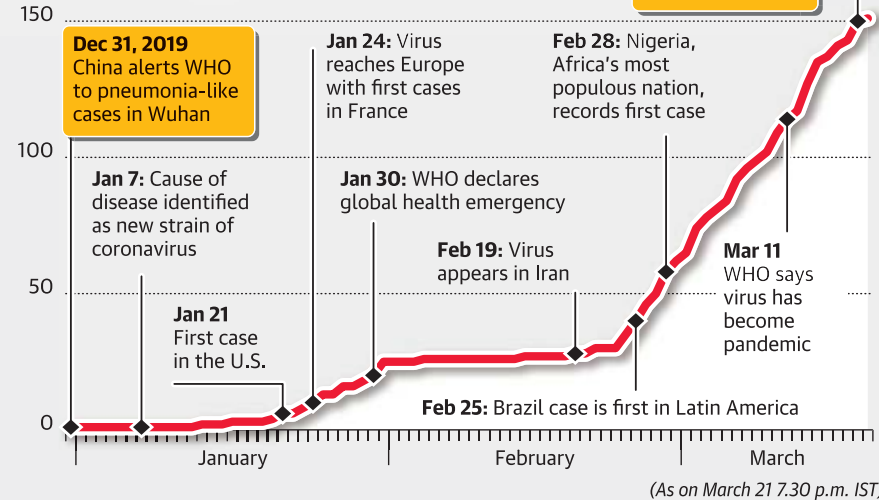
Proliferation across continents

From being confined to China late last year, the COVID-19 has rapidly snowballed into a pandemic, whose impact is now being felt in more than 150 countries

FIRST CONFIRMED CASES OF COVID-19 IN THE COUNTRY



NUMBER OF COUNTRIES WITH CONFIRMED CASES



Country	Cases	Deaths	Recoveries
China	81,304	3,259	71,857
Italy	47,021	4,032	4,440
Spain	25,374	1,375	2,125
Germany	21,652	73	209
Iran	20,610	1,556	7,635
Total	2,84,566	11,868	89,891

Members of Spain's Military Emergency Unit installing a tent hospital in the underground parking lot of the Hospital Universitario Central de Asturias in Oviedo on Thursday. ■ REUTERS

SOURCE: GRAPHIC NEWS, JOHN HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

An Italian tragedy in the making

Why is the Mediterranean country the worst-hit by COVID-19

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
ROME

Loads of people have been wondering why the beautiful Mediterranean country of Italy has become the new epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic. Experts list a range of reasons — from Italy's relatively high age to its strained healthcare system to some old-fashioned bad luck — that add up to a disaster not seen in generations.

None of the answers alone explain why the nation of 60 million accounts for over a third of the nearly 11,500 deaths officially reported across the 7.7-billion strong world.

Median age

One of the first factors almost everyone who looks at the figures points to is Italians' average age. It is high.

The median age of the overall population was 45.4 last year — greater than anywhere else in Europe. It is also seven years higher than the median age in China and slightly above that of South Korea. Figures released on Friday showed the age of Italians dying of CO-



A man being checked in Ostia, Italy. ■ REUTERS

VID-19 averaging out at 78.5. Almost 99% of them were also suffering from at least one pre-existing condition or ailment. Italy's mortality rate across those infected with the virus is thus a relatively high 8.6%. Yet, Japan's median age of 47.3 makes it an even older nation than Italy — and it has just 35 officially registered deaths. So age is clearly not the only factor.

Some scientists think that it could really have been almost any other country after China. "I think the question of 'Why Italy?' is the most important question and it has a simple answer: No reason at all," Yascha Mounk of Johns Hopkins University told Canada's CBC television. "The only thing that makes Italy different is that

the first couple of (locally-transmitted) cases arrived in Italy about 10 days before they arrived in Germany, the United States or Canada."

The grim reality learned across Italy's devastated north is that diseases start spreading much faster once the healthcare system reaches its saturation point.

Old and frail patients who are turned away are extremely contagious.

More testing needed

The world has suddenly realised that it does not have enough test kits to screen for COVID-19. Nations such as Italy dealt with this problem by only testing those who already exhibited symptoms such as a fever and a dry cough. South Korea had the kits and the means to conduct more than 10,000 tests a day. Germany followed a similar model and its death rate began to drop once even the mild COVID-19 infections began being counted. This partially explains both why Italy's mortality rate is so high and why COVID-19 was contained faster in some other countries.

China's imported cases soar

REUTERS
BEIJING

China reported a record rise in imported COVID-19 cases on Friday as students and expatriates returned home from the United States and Europe, sparking fears of a second wave of infections just as the country recovers from the initial outbreak.

All 41 of the new confirmed cases in China were imported from overseas, the country's National Health Commission said on Saturday, bringing the total number of such cases to 269.

There were no locally transmitted cases for the third consecutive day. Beijing and Shanghai were the main entry points for the returnees, many of whom are students studying abroad. They have come back after many campuses in the United States and Europe shut down to stem rapidly rising infection rates there.

Also returning in a flight to safety were China-based expats, as businesses begin to reopen. While there is no reported transmission of the virus from people arriving

from abroad to local communities, authorities across China are tightening public health measures.

Of the 14 new imported cases in Beijing on Friday, five were Chinese students returning from abroad. Among Shanghai's record nine cases, five were students flying back from Britain, France and Switzerland. The southern provinces of Guangdong, Fujian, and the eastern provinces of Shandong and Zhejiang, as well as Shaanxi and Sichuan, all reported cases.

N. Korea fires two ballistic missiles into sea

'Extremely inappropriate,' says S. Korea

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
SEOUL

North Korea fired what appeared to be two short-range ballistic missiles off its east coast on Saturday, the latest in a series of such launches by Pyongyang as the world struggles with the COVID-19 pandemic.

The South Korean military condemned the launches as "extremely inappropriate given the difficult situation the world is experiencing due to COVID-19... We urge them to stop immediately." North Korea has not reported any cases of the COVID-19.

Japan's Defence Ministry also confirmed the North Korean launches.

For decades, North Korea's leadership has faced international criticism for



North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. ■ AP

prioritising spending on its military and nuclear weapons programme instead of providing for the population — even during times of famine.

Shortly before the launch, North Korea's official news agency KCNA reported that the rubber-stamp Parliament, the Supreme People's Assembly, would convene on April 10.

Iran, France carry out prisoner swap

French academic Marchal freed in exchange for Iranian engineer Ruhollahnejad

REUTERS
PARIS

Iranian authorities have released French academic Roland Marchal, who has been imprisoned in Iran since June 2019, a French presidency official said on Saturday.

Mr. Marchal is due to arrive in France around midday on Saturday, the official said.

French President Emmanuel Macron urged Iran to also release French citizen Fariba Adelkhah, who is still imprisoned, the official added.

Violation of sanctions

Iran and France have agreed to swap Mr. Marchal, held on security charges, and an Iranian detained by Paris over alleged violations of U.S. sanctions against Tehran, Iranian state media reported



French researcher Roland Marchal and, right, Iranian engineer Jalal Ruhollahnejad, who were released in a swap. ■ AFP

on Friday. France has released Jalal Ruhollahnejad, an Iranian engineer wanted by U.S. authorities over sanctions charges, state broadcaster IRIB has reported.

France had demanded that Iran release Mr. Marchal, a senior researcher at Sciences Po university whose arrest was reported by Paris in mid-October.

In May, a French court approved the extradition of Mr. Rouhollahnejad to the United States to face charges of attempting to illegally import U.S. technology for military purposes on behalf of an Iranian company which U.S. officials said was linked to the elite Revolutionary Guards. The detentions have complicated ties between

the two countries during a period when Macron was seeking to defuse tensions between Washington and Tehran.

Iran Revolutionary Guards have arrested dozens of dual nationals in recent years, mostly on espionage charges.

The detentions have coincided with a protracted stand-off with Western powers prompted by a U.S. decision to withdraw from an international agreement to curb Iranian nuclear activities.

The Iranian judiciary's news agency Mizan Online reported that Mr. Rouhollahnejad had been freed by France on Friday. Iranian state television showed images of him hugging members of his family during an emotional reunion in Tehran.

ELSEWHERE



U.S. Senate negotiating a \$2 trillion package

WASHINGTON The COVID-19 stimulus package being negotiated by the U.S. Senate would be worth more than \$2 trillion, White House economic adviser Larry Kudlow said on Saturday. "The package is coming in at about 10 percent of GDP," Mr. Kudlow told reporters. Asked if that amounted to more than \$2 trillion, Mr. Kudlow said: "That's correct." ■ REUTERS

Greece gets 5,00,000 masks from China

ATHENS A plane from China carrying 5,00,000 masks landed at Athens Airport on Saturday. Health Minister Vassilis Kikilias was among those at the airport to receive the load which was donated by the Chinese public electricity company State Grid and Greek electricity supplier Admie, in which the Chinese firm holds a 25% stake.

Music legend Kenny Rogers dies at 81

He played a key role in popularising country music in the 1970s and 1980s

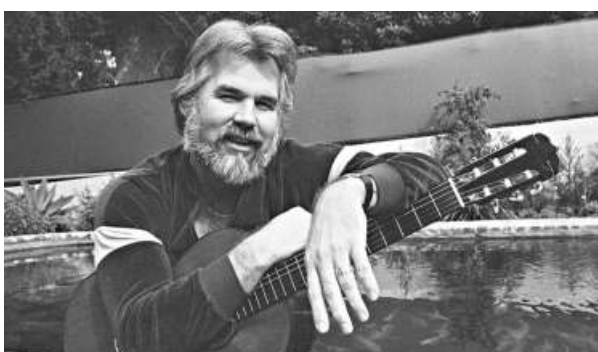
BILL FRISKICS-WARREN

Kenny Rogers, a prolific singer who played a major role in expanding the audience for country music in the 1970s and 1980s, died on Friday at his home in Sandy Springs, Georgia. He was 81.

Mr. Rogers had been in hospice care and died of natural causes, said his publicist, Keith Hagan.

Husky voice

Singing in a husky voice that exuded sincerity and warmth, Mr. Rogers sold well over 100 million records in a career that spanned seven decades. He had 21 No. 1 country hits, including two — "Lady," written and produced by Lionel Richie, and "Islands in the Stream," composed by the Bee Gees and performed with Dolly Parton. By the time he retired from performing for health reasons in 2018, Mr. Rogers had placed more than 50 singles in the coun-



Kenny Rogers at his home in California, in February 1978. ■ AP

try Top 40, of which 20 also appeared in the pop Top 40. Long before the ascendancy of Garth Brooks and Shania Twain in the 1990s, he was among the first country artists to sell out arenas.

Two categories

Mr. Rogers's popularity stemmed partly from his genial persona and rugged good looks but also from his ability to inhabit his material, which, he often said, was of two main types: love

songs like "You Decorated My Life" and narrative ballads like "The Gambler". "All the songs I record fall into one of two categories, as a rule," he said in a 2012 interview with NPR. "One is ballads that say what every man would like to say and every woman would like to hear. The other is story songs that have social significance.

"Reuben James" was about a black man who raised a white child," he continued, referring to a 1969

song that was a Top 40 hit for his group Kenny Rogers and the First Edition.

"'Ruby, Don't Take Your Love to Town' was about a guy who came home from war." "Ruby" in particular revealed Mr. Rogers's command as an interpreter of narrative ballads. Written by Mel Tillis, the song is about a veteran, left impotent and bound to a wheelchair by the Vietnam War, who must endure the agony of watching his wife leave the house every night to meet other men. "And if I could move, I'd get my gun and put her in the ground," Mr. Rogers broods as the record ends.

Duo recordings were a prominent part of Mr. Rogers's repertoire, accounting for more than a dozen country hits, including eight No. 1 records. Several of them, including "Don't Fall in Love With a Dreamer," and "We've Got Tonight," were pop successes as well. ■ NY TIMES

An event that kickstarted an infection spree

It caused 104 cases in Thailand

ASSOCIATED PRESS
BANGKOK

Kickboxing aficionados came from all over Thailand to attend a major Muay Thai match at Bangkok's indoor Lumpini Stadium on March 6. More than 100 went home unknowingly carrying the virus.

As of Saturday, confirmed cases from three boxing stadiums in Bangkok totalled 104, just over a quarter of the national toll of 411. An actor, a major-general, a politician, a boxing trainer and a slew of ordinary fans are among the cases from the March 6 event.

On March 13, local celebrity Matthew Deane Chanthavani posted a message on his Instagram account, claiming that he has the virus. The air-conditioned hall was hosting the first big Muay Thai event of the season. Eleven bouts started at



A Muay Thai boxing fighter in Bangkok. ■ AP

6 p.m. and ended just after midnight. The crowd of about 5,000 roared every time punches and kicks were exchanged. After hearing the news about Deane, another spectator at the event, Suwan Jitpinit asked to be tested for COVID-19. The result came back positive. Ordinary boxing fans from other provinces, both near Bangkok and in the north, the northeast and the south, have also tested positive for the disease.

Curfew extended in Sri Lanka

MEERA SRINIVASAN
COLOMBO

Sri Lanka on Saturday confirmed a total of 77 COVID-19 positive cases, indicating a steady rise since March 10, when the first case of an infected local was reported.

Health Minister Pavithra Wanniarachchi said that 245 more cases are under observation.

Meanwhile, police on Saturday arrested dozens on charges of violating a curfew that came into effect Friday evening. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa had earlier announced the curfew would last until Monday morning, but subsequently extended it by another day, until Tuesday.

The general election, which was earlier scheduled for April 25 has been indefinitely postponed due to the spread of the outbreak.