

Amid lockdowns, virus cases cross 3 lakh

More than half the cases are now in Europe, with Italy, France and Spain shut to the outside world

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
ROME

From Italy to India to the U.S., governments rolled out tougher measures to halt the rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic as global cases surged past 3,00,000 on Sunday and Asia braced for a possible second wave of infections.

Nearly one billion people are already confined to their homes around the world as countries race to contain the ballooning outbreak by imposing unprecedented lockdown measures, shutting shops and businesses and sealing borders. The pandemic has sparked fears of a global recession, prompting governments to unleash gigantic emergency measures to avoid an economic meltdown.

12,000+ deaths

More than 12,000 people have died from the virus worldwide, with the situation increasingly grim in Italy, the new epicentre of the diseases.

Countries in Asia now worry infections could once again mount on their shores

COVID-19

as travellers return from badly-hit parts of Europe, a continent under siege by the pandemic, with more than 1,50,000 declared cases.

Italy has now reported more deaths than mainland China and third-placed Iran combined, and it has a death rate of 8.6% among confirmed COVID-19 infections. The death toll in the Mediterranean nation spiked to more than 4,800 – over a third of the global total.

Lockdown measures have done little to stem new infections and deaths and the go-



Hope, prayers and medicines: A group of nurses wearing protective mask and gear prior to their night shift earlier in March at the Cremona hospital, Lombardy, Italy. •AFP

vernment announced the closure of all non-essential factories in a late-night TV address. In his weekly prayer – now being streamed live to avoid crowds gathering – the Pope urged all Italians to follow isolation measures. “Let us do the things that the government asks us to do for the good of us all,” said Pope Francis. Similar shut-in measures have been rolled out in badly-hit Spain and France.

Britain is also ramping up its response in the wake of steadily rising cases and deaths after the government was criticised for failing to take stricter measures sooner. Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Sunday urged 1.5 million people most at risk from the virus to stay home, as he warned the numbers of infections and deaths “are very stark, and they are accelerating”. Thailand reported its highest daily rise in cases, taking its total to nearly 600, while Singapore, Hong Kong and Malaysia have also reported a spike in cases after numbers had plateaued earlier.

Jaffna reports first case

MEERA SRINIVASAN
COLOMBO

Sri Lanka’s COVID-19 count on Sunday went up to 81, even as over 500 persons with symptoms remain under observation in government hospitals across the country.

Health authorities in the northern Jaffna district confirmed the first case there of a man who reportedly met a pastor who was visiting from

Switzerland recently.

A curfew, in place since Friday evening until Tuesday morning in many districts, is likely to be extended through next week sources said, as part of the government’s efforts to continue combating the pandemic.

Police have so far arrested 790 persons on charges of violating the ongoing curfew, police said in a statement.

Trump writes to Kim

REUTERS
WASHINGTON

North Korea on Saturday welcomed what it said was a letter from U.S. President Donald Trump to North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, saying it was a sign of “the special and very firm personal relations” between the two leaders. A senior administration official confirmed Mr.

Trump sent the letter and said it was “consistent with his efforts to engage global leaders during the ongoing pandemic.” The letter said that despite good personal relations between the leaders, “if impartiality and balance are not provided and unilateral and greedy intention is not taken away, the bilateral relations will continue to aggravate.”

Sen. Rand Paul tests positive

REUTERS
WASHINGTON

Republican U.S. Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky has tested positive for COVID-19, his office said in a statement on Sunday, becoming the first member of the upper chamber of Congress to announce he has COVID-19 as the number of U.S. cases continued to grow. Senator Paul has no symptoms and was tested out of “abundance of caution” given his recent travels, according to the statement, which comes as the Senate prepared to take up an economic relief bill.

Other U.S. Senators self-quarantined as a precaution in recent weeks.

Merkel goes into quarantine

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BERLIN

German Chancellor Angela Merkel will quarantine herself at home after being treated by a doctor who has since tested positive for COVID-19, a government spokesman said on Sunday. “The Chancellor has decided to quarantine herself immediately at home. She will be tested regularly in the coming days... (and) fulfil her official business from home,” Steffen Seibert said in a statement.

The doctor had visited Ms. Merkel on Friday to vaccinate her against the pneumococcus bacteria. It could take some time to determine whether Ms. Merkel is infected as “a test would not yet be fully conclusive,” Mr. Seibert said.

Lessons from Italy for the COVID-19-wracked world

Action to isolate areas, limit movement need to be taken early

JASON HOROWITZ
EMMA BUBOLA
ROME

As Italy’s COVID-19 infections ticked above 400 cases and deaths hit the double digits, the leader of the governing Democratic Party posted a picture of himself clinking glasses for “an aperitivo in Milan,” urging people “not to change our habits.” That was on Feb. 27. Not 10 days later, as the toll hit 5,883 infections and 233 dead, the party boss, Nicola Zingaretti, posted a new video, this time informing Italy that he, too, had the virus.

Italy now has more than 53,000 recorded infections and more than 4,800 dead, and the rate of increase keeps growing, with more than half the cases and fatalities coming in the past week. On Saturday, officials reported 793 additional deaths, by far the largest single-day increase so far.

The government has sent in the Army to enforce the lockdown in Lombardy, the northern region at the centre of the outbreak, where bodies have piled up in churches.

Closure of factories

On Saturday night, Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte announced another drastic step in response to what he called the country’s most difficult crisis since World War II: Italy will close its factories and all production that is not absolutely essential, an enormous economic sacrifice intended to contain the virus and protect lives. “The state is here,” he said in an effort to reassure the public.

The tragedy of Italy now stands as a warning to its Eu-



Municipal employees at a meeting in Milan on Friday. •NYT

ropean neighbors and the United States, where the virus is coming with equal velocity. If Italy’s experience shows anything, it is that measures to isolate affected areas and limit the movement of the broader population need to be taken early, put in place with absolute clarity, then strictly enforced.

Despite now having some of the toughest measures in the world, Italian authorities fumbled many of those steps early in the contagion – when it most mattered as they sought to preserve basic civil liberties as well as the economy. Italy’s piecemeal attempts to cut it off – isolating towns first, then regions, then shutting down the country in an intentionally porous lockdown – always lagged behind the virus’ lethal trajectory.

“Now we are running after it,” said Sandra Zampa, undersecretary at the Ministry of Health, who said Italy did the best it could given the information it had. “We closed gradually, as Europe is doing. France, Spain, Germany, the U.S. are doing the same. Every day you close a

bit, you give up on a bit of normal life. Because the virus does not allow normal life.”

In the critical early days of the outbreak, Mr. Conte and other top officials sought to downplay the threat, creating confusion and a false sense of security that allowed the virus to spread.

They blamed Italy’s high number of infections on aggressive testing of people without symptoms in the north, which they argued only created hysteria and tarnished the country’s image abroad.

Even once the Italian government considered a universal lockdown necessary to defeat the virus, it failed to communicate the threat powerfully enough to persuade Italians to abide by the rules, which seemed riddled with loopholes.

“It is not easy in a liberal democracy,” said Walter Ricciardi, a World Health Organization (WHO) board member and a top adviser to the Health Ministry, who argued that the Italian government acted on the scientific evidence made available to it. NY TIMES

Can China’s model work for the West?

Its top-down COVID-19 approach may be hard to replicate

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BEIJING

The head of the World Health Organization believes China’s battle with COVID-19 offers a beacon of hope, but others question whether Beijing’s strategy can be followed by other countries – particularly Western democracies.

China has reported only one new local infection over the past four days, a seemingly remarkable turnaround given the chaos that surrounded the initial outbreak in the city of Wuhan. While some experts caution against accepting Beijing’s figures at face value, WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus insisted China’s success “provides hope for the rest of the world”.

But China is a particular case – a centrally-controlled, top-down, one-party authoritarian state that allows no dissent and can mobilise vast resources on a single issue. In January, Chi-



Two medical workers in Wuhan on completion of relief work. •AFP

na effectively shut down Wuhan and placed its 11 million residents in effective quarantine – a move it then replicated in the rest of Hubei province, putting 50 million people in mass isolation. Hundreds of millions of Chinese live in closed residential complexes where neighbourhood committees can police movement in and out – meaning compliance could be closely monitored. “Containment works,” said Sharon Lewin, profes-

sor of medicine at the University of Melbourne. “Two weeks after the closure of Wuhan, which is exactly the incubation period, the number (of infections) started to drop.” In cities, it quickly became necessary to wear a mask as apartment blocks, businesses and even parks barred entry without one.

During the crisis, China produced up to 1.6 million N95 respirator masks per day, according to the official Xinhua news agency. To boost detection rates, temperature checkpoints were installed outside buildings and shops, or in public places. And in the high-tech country where privacy is limited, many localities require citizens to show a QR code on their phone that rates them as “green,” “yellow” or “red”.

This assessment – based on tracking of whether they visited a high-risk zone – is now an entrance requirement for many businesses.

COVID-19-hit Zagreb suffers quake jolt

5.3-magnitude earthquake is the biggest to hit Croatia’s capital, says PM

REUTERS
ZAGREB

A large earthquake struck near the Croatian capital Zagreb on Sunday, leaving a teenager critically injured after an apartment building in the city collapsed, the GFZ German Research Center for Geosciences and a hospital official said.

Another minor was badly injured and the quake caused several fires and power blackouts in parts of the capital, hospital and emergency services said.

Call for calm

Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic called on citizens to remain outside their homes amid potential aftershocks. Mr. Plenkovic and Interior Minister Davor Bozovic also appealed for people rushing onto the streets to keep social distances from each other as the country struggles to contain the spread of COVID-19. So far, Croatia has reported 206 cases of the vi-



Double shock: A wall that collapsed due to the impact of Sunday’s quake in Zagreb, Croatia. •AP

rus and one death. “We will do our utmost to make the best estimate of what to do at the moment. There are protocols when it comes to an earthquake. But when it comes to an earthquake combined with the global pandemic, then it is a much more complicated situation,” Mr. Bozovic told local media.

Mr. Plenkovic said the quake, with a magnitude of

5.3 according to GFZ, was the biggest to hit Zagreb in 140 years. It struck 6 km north of the city and was felt across the Western Balkans.

building and another minor had been admitted with head injuries from a falling roof. The Zagreb Fire Department said fire-fighting and rescue operations were ongoing at several locations. Mr. Plenkovic said the Army had been called in to help clean up debris in Zagreb and urged citizens to “stay outside and keep your distance”.

“The situation is contradictory, we invited people to stay at home to avoid spreading of the coronavirus, and now we are advising them to leave their homes,” Mr. Plenkovic told a press conference. GFZ downgraded the magnitude of the quake from an initial reading of 6.0.

The U.S. Geological Survey said the quake measured 5.4, while the European Mediterranean Seismological Centre (EMSC) also reported 5.3 magnitude, followed by another 5.1 magnitude earthquake.

Guinea referendum to extend Conde’s rule

Residents vote despite COVID-19 scare

REUTERS
CONAKRY

Despite the threat of COVID-19 and an Opposition boycott, a constitutional referendum was held in Guinea on Sunday that opponents of President Alpha Conde fear could allow him to govern for 12 more years.

Opposition supporters heeding a call to disrupt the referendum and simultaneous legislative election attacked several polling stations in the capital Conakry, delaying the start of voting in some districts.

The Opposition boycott all but ensures the new basic law will be approved when results are announced in the coming days, despite the risk it could trigger wider unrest that would, along



A man preparing to cast his vote in Conakry, Guinea, on Sunday. •AFP

with COVID-19, threaten Guinea’s mining economy.

With the first two cases of the COVID-19 disease recorded in the country, some polling stations required voters to wash their hands before casting their ballot and radio stations reminded citizens to keep their distance from one another.

How it came apart for Bernie Sanders

He failed to expand his message beyond his traditional base and unify Democrats, say officials

ALEXANDER BURNS
JONATHAN MARTIN

In mid-January, a few weeks before the Iowa caucuses, Senator Bernie Sanders’ pollster offered a stark prognosis for the campaign: Mr. Sanders was on track to finish strong in the first three nominating States, but Joe Biden’s powerful support from older African Americans could make him a resilient foe in South Carolina and beyond.

The pollster, Ben Tulchin, in a meeting with campaign aides, recommended a new offensive to influence older black voters, according to three people. The data showed two clear vulnerabilities for Mr. Biden: his past support for overhauling Social Security, and his authorship of a punitive criminal justice law in the 1990s.



Left stranded again: Bernie Sanders with his wife Jane O’Meara Sanders in Essex Junction, Vermont, on March 3. •AFP

But the suggestion met with resistance. Some senior advisers argued that it wasn’t worth diverting resources from Iowa and New Hampshire. Others pressed Mr. Tulchin on what kind of message, exactly, would make voters rethink their support for the most loyal ally of the first black President. Crucially, both Mr. Sanders

and his wife, Jane, consistently expressed reservations about going negative on Mr. Biden, preferring to stick with the left-wing policy message they have been pressing for 40 years. The warnings about Mr. Biden proved prescient.

In the view of some Sanders advisers, the candidate’s abrupt decline was a

result of unforeseeable and highly unlikely events – most of all, the sudden withdrawal of two major candidates, Sen. Amy Klobuchar and former Mayor Pete Buttigieg, who instantly threw their support to Mr. Biden and helped spur a rapid coalescing of moderate support behind his campaign.

Reversal in fortune

But interviews with more than three dozen Sanders aides revealed a more extensive picture of his reversal of political fortune. Though Mr. Sanders climbed to a position of seeming dominance by mid-February, he and his inner circle also made a series of fateful decisions that left him ill-positioned to win over sceptical Democrats.

Mr. Sanders proved unable to expand his base well

beyond the left or to win over African Americans in meaningful numbers. He failed to heed warnings from traditional party leaders, and even from within his campaign, about the need to modulate his message and unify Democrats. He allowed internal arguments to fester within his campaign, an ungainly operation that fragmented into factions beneath the only two real decision-makers – Mr. Sanders and his wife.

Perhaps the most significant factor, as with every presidential campaign, was the candidate himself, and the stubborn ideological and stylistic consistency that both endeared Mr. Sanders to his supporters and limited his ability to build a coalition larger than his progressive movement. NY TIMES

ELSEWHERE



U.S. relief to include \$4 trillion of liquidity

WASHINGTON The COVID-19 economic relief bill being finalised by the U.S. Congress will include a one-time \$3,000 payment for families and allow the Federal Reserve to leverage up to \$4 trillion of liquidity to support the nation’s economy, U.S. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said on Sunday. REUTERS

Afghanistan reports first virus-linked death

MAZAR-I-SHARIF Afghanistan on Sunday reported its first fatality due to COVID-19, after a man died in the north of the impoverished and war-torn country. Officials said the 40-year-old victim died in Balkh province, which borders Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, from complications due to the COVID-19 disease. AFP

Putin sends aid to Italy to fight virus

MOSCOW The Russian Army on Sunday began flying medical help to Italy to help it battle the virus after receiving an order from President Vladimir Putin. Giant Il-76 planes began taking off from an airbase in the Moscow region after he spoke to Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte on Saturday. REUTERS

French hospital doctor dies of COVID-19

PARIS France on Sunday reported its first death of a hospital doctor from COVID-19. Health Minister Olivier Veran said that as far as he knew the man – who died on Saturday – was the “first hospital doctor to be hit”. The accident and emergency practitioner worked at a hospital in Compiègne, north of Paris, AFP was able to confirm. AFP