

# Pandemic is accelerating, says WHO

To win, we need to attack the virus with aggressive and targeted tactics, says agency chief Tedros

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
PARIS

The new COVID-19 pandemic is clearly “accelerating”, the World Health Organization (WHO) warned on Monday, but said it was still possible to change its trajectory by going on the attack. The remarks came as the number of deaths soared past 15,000, with more than 3,41,000 people infected worldwide, according to a tally compiled by AFP from official sources.

“The pandemic is accelerating,” WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told a virtual news conference. He said it took 67 days from the beginning of the outbreak in China in December for the virus to infect the first 1,00,000 people worldwide. In comparison, it took 11 days for the second 1,00,000 cases and just four days for the third 1,00,000 cases, he said. The number of officially recorded cases is believed to represent only a fraction of the true number of infections, with many countries only testing the most severe cases in need of hospitalisation. “We are not helpless bystanders. We can change the trajectory of this pandemic,” Mr. Tedros said.

Physical distancing could buy time by slowing down the spread, “but they are defensive measures that will not help us to win,” he warned. “To win, we need to attack the virus with aggressive and targeted tactics,” he said, reiterating a call for “testing every suspected case, isolating and caring for every confirmed case and tracing and quarantining every close contact.”

## On lockdown mode

Some 1.7 billion people have been asked to stay home in over 50 countries and territories around the world, ac-



Rescue efforts: Medical staff with a COVID-19 victim at the Mulhouse civil hospital, France. • AP

ording to an AFP tally on Monday. Some countries have imposed mandatory lockdown measures, while others have issued stay-at-home recommendations to stem the spread of the virus.

Lockdowns in parts of India alone have kept some 700 million people hemmed in. At least 34 more countries and territories have also established mandatory lockdown measures ordering people to stay in their homes, accounting for some 659 million people. France, Italy, Argentina, the U.S. State of California, Iraq and Rwanda have also rolled out enforced lockdowns. Greece is the most recent country to impose mandatory confinement measures, which came into effect on Monday morning.

Colombia will enforce an obligatory lockdown on Tuesday and New Zealand will follow suit on Wednesday. In most cases, it is still possible for people to go to work, buy essentials or seek medical care.

## Gotabaya sets up relief fund

MEERA SRINIVASAN  
COLOMBO

Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa on Monday set up a special fund to combat COVID-19, inviting contributions locally and internationally. President Rajapaksa has instructed to donate LKR 100 million from the President's Fund for this purpose, his office said in a statement.

Authorities, including a national task force leading the response to COVID-19, are yet to share details of the government's spending so far in its efforts to contain the pandemic.

As on Monday, Sri Lanka had at least 91 confirmed cases of COVID-19, while nearly 600 persons with suspected symptoms were under observation. The first local, who was detected positive earlier this month, has fully recovered and was

discharged from hospital on Monday, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa said in the tweet.

The Prime Minister has also convened an all-party leaders' meeting on Tuesday to discuss next steps.

An island-wide curfew is in place this week – with small windows on select days in between – and police have arrested over 1,600 people on charges of violating the curfew that came into effect on Friday evening.

“We have been insisting that people remain confined to their homes and avoid visiting even their neighbours. It is very crucial that we follow this diligently to arrest the spread. And enforcing a curfew has certainly helped,” police spokesman Ajith Rohana told *The Hindu*.

## S. Korea reports fewest cases since Feb. 29

REUTERS  
SEOUL

South Korea reported on Monday its lowest number of new virus cases and the extended downward trend in daily infections since the peak on February 29 has boosted hopes that Asia's largest outbreak outside China may be abating.

The Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) said there were 64 new cases on Monday, taking the national tally to 8,961. The death toll rose to 118, from 110.

The new numbers marked the 12th day in a row the country has posted new infections of around 100 or less.

## Germany's infection curve flattening

REUTERS  
BERLIN

Signs are emerging that the exponential upwards curve in new COVID-19 infections in Germany is flattening off for the first time thanks to social distancing measures, the head of Germany's public health institute said on Monday. Early testing had helped the health authorities and restrictions on public gatherings in places over the last week appeared to be working, said Lothar Wieler, head of the Robert Koch Institute. As of Sunday, there were 22,672 cases in Germany, with 86 deaths, the Robert Koch Institute for infectious diseases said.

## Italy bans domestic travel

Numbers will continue to grow, warns Prime Minister Conte

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
ROME

Italy banned domestic travel and shut down a range of industries on Monday in a last-ditch push against the spread of a virus that has killed nearly 5,500 people in a month.

The wave of restrictions is designed to ensure Italy gets through a 10-day stretch in which the rate of deaths and infections is supposed to finally drop. “Everyone's effort is needed,” Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte told reporters. “The country's social and economic strength is at stake.”

Italian health officials reported that the rate of in-

crease in both deaths and declared infections slowed on Sunday – albeit from a high base. There were 651 fatalities on Sunday compared with Saturday's record 793 deaths while the number of new reported infections fell to 5,560 from 6,557. But Mr. Conte told Italians it was too early to let down their guard.

“We have not reached the most acute phase of the infection and the numbers will continue to grow,” he said. “Much depends on the responsible behaviour of each one of us.”

Mr. Conte's latest order comes after he caused confusion on Saturday by order-

ing all “non-essential” factories and trades to shut until April 3. The government released a long list of industries and professions that would still be allowed – including translation services and computer repair shops.

The initial restrictions placed on Lombardy – the northern region at the centre of the Italian epidemic that includes the financial capital Milan – expired on Sunday and the national measures are set to end on Wednesday. “If everyone – and I stress everyone – respects our bans, we will emerge from this very difficult test first,” said Mr. Conte on Monday.

## China sees drop in imported cases

Many of them are students returning from other nations

REUTERS  
BEIJING/SHANGHAI

Mainland China on Monday reported a drop in its daily tally of new COVID-19 cases, reversing four straight days of increases, as the capital, Beijing, ramped up measures to contain the number of infections arriving from abroad.

China had 39 new confirmed cases on Sunday, the National Health Commission said, down from 46 a day earlier. All the new ones involved travellers arriving from abroad, many of them Chinese students returning home.

Beijing stepped up measures to contain imported infections, diverting all arriving international flights from Monday to other cities, including Shanghai and as far west as Xian, where passengers will undergo virus screening.



Food for thought: A worker taking orders outside a bakery in Beijing on Monday. • AP

Beijing reported 10 new imported cases, the National Health Commission said, down from 13 a day earlier. City authorities said cases came from Spain, Britain, France, the U.S. and Pakistan. Infections from abroad in Beijing hit an all-time daily high of 21 on March 18.

Shanghai and Guangzhou have also said all arriving international passengers will be tested to screen for the virus, expanding a pro-

gramme that previously only applied to those coming from heavily affected countries.

In Wuhan, the epicentre of the outbreak, authorities have eased tough lockdown measures as the city saw no new infections for the fifth day.

Downtown Wuhan remains the only high-risk area in Hubei province, with other cities and counties classified as low-risk.

## ELSEWHERE



### New York Mayor calls for nationwide lockdown

NEW YORK  
New York Mayor Bill de Blasio urged President Donald Trump on Monday to enforce a nationwide lockdown to contain the virus's spread. Around a third of Americans are on various phases of virtual lockdown, including in the U.S.'s three biggest cities of New York, Los Angeles and Chicago. AFP

### Weinstein tests positive for the virus

WASHINGTON  
Disgraced Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein has tested positive for SARS-CoV-2, U.S. media reported on Sunday. The fallen film producer's diagnosis was reported on Sunday evening by celebrity news website TMZ and local paper the *Niagara Gazette*. Weinstein's spokespeople have declined to comment on the subject. AFP

## Pompeo in Kabul to break deadlock

Both Ghani and Abdullah claim Afghan presidency

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
KABUL

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo arrived in the Afghan capital on Monday to help break a poisonous political deadlock that has further riven the country just as the Taliban is increasing attacks and a rise in COVID-19 cases threatens an already-floundering peace process.

Afghanistan has been enmeshed in a political crisis since elections last year left the country in disarray due to numerous fraud claims that ultimately saw two men claiming the presidency and holding separate inaugurations. Mr. Pompeo was to hold both separate and joint meetings with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani – the election's official winner – along with his arch-rival Abdullah Abdullah, who also claims the presidency.

“We have tried... for the last several weeks to try to find the formula and encourage them to come to an agreement,” a senior State



U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, with former Afghan Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah in Kabul on Monday. • AP

Department official said, according to a pool report.

Mr. Pompeo has come “to help push, to encourage and to point out what our expectations are and what that assessment is if they don't do the right thing”.

### Welcomed by Khalilzad

The top U.S. diplomat was welcomed by special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad – the lead U.S. negotiator in recent talks with the Taliban – after arriving at Kabul airport.

The visit comes just a day

after the Afghan government and Taliban held their first discussion on prisoner exchanges – a key step in a broader push for peace following a withdrawal deal signed between Washington and the militants. The agreement established a framework for bringing to an end America's longest war. The spat between Mr. Abdullah and Mr. Ghani, along with the world's preoccupation with COVID-19, has sparked fears the window for a peace deal is closing fast.

## Fear and foreboding in New York City

With more than 12,000 cases, it has emerged as the COVID-19 epicentre in the U.S.

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
NEW YORK

Anxiety ratcheted up across New York, the epicentre of America's COVID-19 pandemic, on Monday with streets eerily quiet at the start of the working week as officials warned the crisis will worsen.

As the number of deaths in the United States from COVID-19 soars towards 500, the Big Apple finds itself at Ground Zero in the fight to stem the fast-breaking outbreak.

With millions of residents ordered to stay at home, all non-essential businesses shut and schools closed, the city that never sleeps is bedding down for a long and uncertain slumber.

### Uncertainty in the air

For Christian Hofer – and his wife and two young children – the most difficult thing is not knowing how long the unprecedented measures are going to last. “It goes from a range of emotions, from feeling very nervous



Combat mode: A member of Joint Task Force arrives to sanitise an area in New Rochelle, New York, on Monday. • REUTERS

about the situation to feeling like how absurd it is,” said the 42-year-old Wall Street trader.

New York City is now the focal point of America's outbreak, with more than 12,000 confirmed cases and almost 100 deaths, after the outbreak first spread in Washington State.

As only non-essential workers, such as pharmacists, grocery store workers

wet weather added to the fear and foreboding that hung over America's financial capital, which has been through its fair share of disasters, notably 9/11.

### Mental health issues

“I'm scared for me and patients that this could go on” for months, said Lucy, a psychologist who declined to give her surname. Anxiety and depression “all gets heightened at a time like this,” she added, one of the few hardy souls out and about on Manhattan's Upper East Side.

In Florida, which has 1,000 confirmed cases and 13 deaths, the Governor opened a centre where the elderly can drive their golf carts to get tested.

U.S. Surgeon General Jerome Adams warned that the numbers across America were going to get worse before they get better. “We really need everyone to understand this is serious, to lean into what they can do to flatten the curve.”

## Scientists identify drug candidates against virus

They investigated 26 of the SARS-CoV-2's 29 genes, which direct production of the viral proteins

CARL ZIMMER

Nearly 70 drugs and experimental compounds may be effective in treating the COVID-19 disease, a team of researchers reported on Sunday night. Some of the medications are already used to treat other diseases, and repurposing them to treat COVID-19 may be faster than trying to invent a new anti-viral from scratch, the scientists said.

The list of drug candidates appeared in a study published on the website bioRxiv. The researchers have submitted the paper to a journal for publication.

To come up with the list, hundreds of researchers embarked on an unusual study of the genes of the coronavi-



A researcher working on a vaccine against COVID-19 in Copenhagen, Denmark. • AFP

rus, also called SARS-CoV-2. To infect a lung cell, the virus must insert its genes, co-opting the cell's own genetic machinery. The cell begins to produce viral proteins, which are used to produce millions of new viruses. Each of those viral proteins must be able to latch onto the ne-

cessary human proteins for the process to work.

In the new study, the scientists investigated 26 of the virus's 29 genes, which direct production of the viral proteins. Researchers found 332 human proteins targeted by the virus. Some viral proteins seemed to target just one human protein; other viral proteins are capable of targeting a dozen human cellular proteins.

### 24 drugs identified

Researchers sought drugs that also latch onto the human proteins that the virus seems to need to enter and replicate in human cells. The team eventually identified 24 drugs approved by the Food and Drug Administration to treat such seemingly unrelat-

ed diseases as cancer, Parkinson's disease and hypertension. Intriguingly, some of the possible treatments are drugs used to attack parasites. And the list includes antibiotics that kill bacteria by gumming up the cellular machinery they use to build proteins. But some of those drugs also attach to human proteins.

The new study raises the possibility that this side effect might turn out to be an anti-viral treatment.

One drug on the list, chloroquine, kills the single-celled parasite that causes malaria. Scientists have long known that it can also attach to a human cellular protein called the sigma-1 receptor. And that receptor is also the target of the virus.

Chloroquine has been much in the news this past week, thanks to speculation about its use against the coronavirus – some of which was repeated by President Donald Trump last week.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, followed the president's remarks with a warning that there was only “anecdotal evidence” that chloroquine might work. Only well-run trials could establish whether chloroquine was safe and effective against the coronavirus, Dr. Fauci said.

On Wednesday, the World Health Organization announced it would begin a trial on chloroquine, among other drugs. NY TIMES

## U.S. hiker survives 200-foot fall

Ashley Furness was saved by rocks on Mount Washington

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
BRETTON WOODS

A hiker descending Mount Washington who fell about 200 feet (60.9 m) and got hurt was rescued with the help of the Cog Railway train that takes visitors up and down the summit during tourism season. New Hampshire Fish and Game conservation officers said the hiker, Ashley Furness, 35, of Bartlett, was with a companion on Sunday afternoon when she slipped and fell, striking several rocks.

She was descending along the railway tracks and was about 2 miles up from the railway station. “It was these rocks that ultimately saved her from plunging into the ravine, a fall that would have likely proved fatal,” Lt. Mark



A vintage coal-fired steam engine from Cog Railway was used to rescue the hiker. • AP

Ober, Jr. said. “Her companion was able to descend to her position, place a call for help and keep her warm with a space blanket until rescuers arrived.”

Rescuers could only get so far using an ATV and snowmobiles. There was no snow. Crews hiked the rest of the way and reached Ms. Furness after several hours, but injuries were severe and she

couldn't walk, said Lt. Ober. Due to the steep, icy, terrain and remote location, the Cog Railway prepared a train to retrieve Ms. Furness. In the meantime, a rescue belay was set up with ropes and other gear to hoist Ms. Furness up to the tracks. The train reached her and returned to a waiting ambulance at the base around 11 p.m. on Sunday.