

11 THE OUTBREAK THE WORLD

PANDEMIC WATCH



The crowd at a stall in Colombo, Tuesday. AP

SRI LANKA 100 COVID-19 cases reported

Colombo: Sri Lanka's coronavirus cases Tuesday reached 100 with authorities reporting four new cases, health officials said. In view of the rising number of the novel coronavirus cases globally, the country has suspended all international flights arriving in the country. "We have found four more today and all of them were arrivals from abroad — three from Italy and one from the US," Dr Anil Jasinghe, Director General of Health Services, said. On Tuesday, the authorities opened Colombo for the first time in four days after a continuous curfew as part of the lockdown.

BANGLADESH Ex-PM Zia to be released for six months

Dhaka: Bangladesh on Tuesday initiated a process to "conditionally" release jailed former prime minister Khaleda Zia for six months amid the coronavirus outbreak in the country, Law Minister Anisul Huq told PTI. The 74-year-old opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party chief is serving a 17-year prison term in two graft cases since February 8, 2018. "The decision has been taken on humanitarian ground," Huq said. He said the decision was taken in line with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's directives and considering the age of the former prime minister.

ICELAND First COVID-19 death confirmed

Reykjavik: Icelandic health authorities said Tuesday that a patient in her 60s had died from COVID-19, marking the country's first confirmed death from the coronavirus. According to a statement from The National University Hospital of Iceland, the Icelandic woman had also been suffering from a chronic illness. It is the first death from COVID-19 to be confirmed. According to Icelandic media reports, an Australian tourist who was confirmed to have the virus died early last week. But the man's symptoms were not typical of COVID-19 and doctors have yet to determine the exact cause of death.

China to lift lockdown in most of Hubei province

ASSOCIATED PRESS BEIJING, MARCH 24

Chinese authorities said Tuesday they will end a two-month lockdown of most of coronavirus-hit Hubei province at midnight, as domestic cases of what has become a global pandemic subside. People with a clean bill of health will be allowed to leave, the provincial government said, easing restrictions on movement that were unprecedented in scale. The city of Wuhan, where the virus was first detected in December, is to remain locked down until April 8. China barred people from leaving or entering Wuhan be-

OVER 16,000 CASES, 130 DEATHS in a day in the United States

LOCKDOWN COULD DESTROY U.S. warns Trump, pushes to relax measures

17,000 DEATHS, 400,000 CASES have been reported globally so far

US may exceed Europe as epicentre: WHO

AGENCIES WASHINGTON, MARCH 24

THE COVID-19 outbreak in the United States has the potential to exceed that in Europe, the World Health Organisation (WHO) said Tuesday as the number of reported US cases surges.

WHO spokeswoman Margaret Harris told reporters during a virtual press conference that 85 per cent of the new cases reported to the global body overnight had come from Europe and the US, now the two "main drivers of the outbreak".

The latest WHO coronavirus daily situation report — published late Monday, before the overnight figures — showed that Europe reported 20,131 new cases in the preceding 24 hours, while the United States reported 16,354, more than doubling its total caseload.

The US also for the first time registered over 130 deaths in a day due to coronavirus, taking the total number of fatalities to 550 by Monday night.

Asked whether the United States could overtake Europe as the epicentre of COVID-19, Harris said: "We are now seeing a very large acceleration in the number of cases from the US, so it does have that potential. "We cannot say that that is the case yet but it does have that potential."

"They have a very large outbreak and an outbreak increasing in intensity."

Trump on Tuesday defended his push to relax the coronavirus lockdown in the United States, warning that the measures could "destroy" the country.

"A lot of people agree with me. Our country — it's not built to shut down," he said on Fox News. "You can destroy a country this way by closing it down."

Trump signed an executive order aimed at preventing hoarding of critical medical supplies amid the coronavirus



HOSPITAL SHIP: The USNS Mercy leaves San Diego on Tuesday for Los Angeles to help free up hospital beds. AP

outbreak. "Very simply, we will not allow anyone to exploit the suffering of American citizens for their own profit," he asserted.

In New York, now one of the world's biggest virus hot spots, authorities rushed to set up the thousands of hospital beds they will need in just weeks to protect the city's 8.4 million people. More than 12,000 people have tested positive in the city and 125 have died. A state-wide lockdown took effect Monday.

The mayor warned that the city's hospitals are just 10 days away from shortages in basic supplies, while the state's governor announced plans to convert a New York City convention center into a hospital.

"This is going to get much worse before it gets better," New York Governor Andrew Cuomo said.

EXPLAINED Concern over Trump stance

THE TRUMP administration's continued stance of saying no to a total lockdown has led to concern among some lawmakers and experts. Trump has drawn comparisons to the flu as well as automobile accidents, both of which, he says, cause "more" casualties. While economic fallout is regarded as a vital concern, many have questioned if that is where immediate priority lies.

Impasse over \$2-trn aid package continues

NEW YORK TIMES NEW YORK, MARCH 24

THE SENATE'S top Democrat and the treasury secretary said on Monday night that they were close to a deal on a nearly \$2 trillion economic stabilization package to respond to the coronavirus pandemic.

The announcement came hours after Democrats voted for the second time to block action until they had secured more worker protections and restrictions on bailed-out companies.

"We expect to have an agreement in the morning," Senator Chuck Schumer, Democrat of New

York and the minority leader, told reporters just before midnight, as he wrapped up a final meeting with Steven Mnuchin, the treasury secretary. "There are still a few little differences," he said.

Mnuchin said the two sides were very close to a compromise, though both sides cautioned there was no final agreement and the negotiations remained fluid. The two men called President Trump just before they broke for the night.

Schumer said the president's response had been "very positive," despite a tweet in which Trump accused Democrats of sabotaging the package and wanting "the virus to win."

Italy's cases likely '10 times higher'; toll spikes by 743

REUTERS ROME, MARCH 24

THE NUMBER of cases of coronavirus in Italy is probably 10 times higher than the official tally of almost 64,000, the head of the agency that is collating the data said on Tuesday.

Latest figures show over 6,000 people have died from the infection in barely a month, making Italy the worst-affected country in the world. On Tuesday, an official said the country recorded 743 deaths, surging to break a two-day trend.

However, testing for the disease has often been limited to people seeking hospital care, meaning that thousands of cases have certainly gone undetected.

"A ratio of one certified case out of every 10 is credible," Angelo Borrelli, the head of the Civil Protection Agency, told La Repubblica newspaper, indicat-

ing he believed as many as 640,000 people could have been infected in the country.

He said the biggest difficulty facing Italy was a shortage of masks and ventilators — a problem that has dogged the health system since the contagion first surfaced in the wealthy northern region of Lombardy on February 21. Italy is trying to import stocks from abroad, but Borrelli said nations like India, Romania, Russia and Turkey had halted such sales.

German state to take in Italian patients

Hospitals in the German state of Saxony will take on at least six Italian patients who are unable to receive treatment in their own country, state premier Michael Kretschmer has said.

"The Italian government asked us a few days ago whether we could help by taking care of patients who are not being taken care of in Italy," Kretschmer said.



Medical workers at a hospital in Rome on Tuesday. Reuters

G-20 leaders likely to discuss virus in virtual summit

SHUBHAJIT ROY NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

AMIDST THE global COVID-19 pandemic, moves are afoot to schedule an extraordinary G-20 leaders' summit through video-conference this week. Saudi Arabia, which is the chair of the G-20 this year, is going to take the lead in the scheduling of the video-conference, which could be conducted as early as Thursday.

On Tuesday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke to European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and discussed the global situation in the context of the pandemic.

"The two leaders discussed possible cooperation within the G-20 framework and the forthcoming video-conference in this context," a statement by the Ministry of External Affairs said.

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar spoke to his counterpart in the EU, Vice President and High Representative Josep Borrell. "Assured him of our

fullest support in the return of EU citizens from India," Jaishankar tweeted.

Jaishankar also had a phone conversation with Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi.

Earlier, Modi had called up Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and discussed the possibility of a G-20 leaders' summit through a video-conference. The Indian leadership had also reached out to Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison in this regard.

Finance ministers of the G-20 have already spoken to each other over video conference. This could be followed by a G-20 sherpa video conference on Wednesday or Thursday.

A video conference of senior health professionals of SAARC countries is proposed to be held on March 26 to exchange experiences on combating the spread of COVID-19, officials said on Monday. This will be a follow-up to the video-conference of SAARC leaders on March 15.

Pak announces multi-billion package, cases rise to 956

SAJJAD HUSSAIN ISLAMABAD, MARCH 24

PAKISTAN PRIME Minister Imran Khan on Tuesday announced a multi-billion stimulus package to combat the deadly coronavirus and to facilitate poor people in the prevailing circumstances as the country's COVID-19 cases rose to 956.

Khan said 200 billion rupees have been allocated for the labour class to mitigate their sufferings. He said the government was highly conscious of its responsibilities and it was due to various policies and steps that the coronavirus was still contained. Khan said that the "situation is in a flux and all options are on the table, including curfew if needed."

Khan said exports and industry are vital for the economy and 100 billion rupees have been reserved for release of tax refund immediately. He said 150 billion rupees have been reserved for poor families across Pakistan under which every family will get an assistance of three thousand rupees on monthly basis. PTI

514 MORE DEAD IN 24 HOURS, TOLL NOW NEARLY 2,700 In Spain, elderly people in nursing homes 'abandoned, if not dead in their beds'

NEW YORK TIMES NEW YORK, MARCH 24

THE SPANISH army has found elderly people abandoned in several nursing homes, raising alarm for those most vulnerable and in need of care with much of life in the country shut down.

This comes even as 514 more people have died over the past 24 hours, raising the death toll to 2,696, as the number of infections surged towards 40,000, as per a PTI report. The number of people who have been diagnosed with COVID-19 rose by nearly 20 percent to 39,673, the report added.

The government will be "forceful" in its response to those who abandon older people, Margarita Robles, Spain's defense minister, said Monday in an interview with Telecinco, a Spanish television channel.

Robles said emergency military units dispatched to disinfect



Military personnel in Bilbao, northern Spain. AP

nursing homes had found some residents "absolutely abandoned, if not dead in their beds."

The defense ministry said that dead bodies had been found in multiple nursing homes that had discharged large number of employees in the wake of the outbreaks, but did not provide further details, El Pais, a daily broadsheet, reported.

Workers at nursing homes have been calling for protective equipment as residents and fellow employees became infected with the coronavirus, leaving them short-handed and at personal risk in their workplaces. Representatives of the industry have called on the government to support them, rather than criticise them.

UK lockdown as virus death count leaps by 87 to 422

REUTERS LONDON, MARCH 24

THE UNITED Kingdom went into lockdown on Tuesday as the number of coronavirus deaths jumped and the government called for 250,000 volunteers for the health service, as it announced a temporary hospital would open in London with help from the military.

The death toll from coronavirus in the UK has jumped by 87 to a total of 422 — the biggest daily increase so far.

In a TV message on Monday evening, Prime Minister Boris Johnson ordered people to stay at home, nearly all shops to close and banned social gatherings. However, public transport in London was busy during the morning rush hour, and streets were far from deserted amid confusion over the government's advice to workers.

"These measures are not advice, they are rules and will be enforced, including by the police," health minister Matt Hancock told parliament.

'THE SECURITY ARGUMENT IS THE ONE ALWAYS USED TO JUSTIFY LOSS OF PRIVACY'

For Moscow's quarantined, 100,000 cameras are watching

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA MOSCOW, MARCH 24

A VAST and contentious network of facial recognition cameras keeping watch over Moscow is now playing a key role in the battle against the spread of the coronavirus in Russia.

The city rolled out the technology just before the epidemic reached Russia, ignoring protests and legal complaints over sophisticated state surveillance.

Since last month, thousands of Muscovites have been confined to their homes for 14 days

of compulsory quarantine after returning from virus-hit countries, being in contact with those infected or diagnosed with mild symptoms. Police have logged their details and warned them that sneaking out into the city and daily visitors could lead to a five-year jail term or deportation for foreigners.

"We are constantly checking that this regulation is being observed, including through the use of automated facial recognition systems," Mayor Sergei Sobyenin wrote in his blog in February.

Around 100,000 cameras have now been linked to arti-



Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow. Reuters

cial intelligence systems that can identify people being filmed. The

remaining cameras are due to be connected soon.

Moscow police said last week that the cameras that are linked have allowed them to identify almost 200 people who broke quarantine rules.

President Vladimir Putin last week toured a hi-tech centre set up to monitor the virus situation and Russia's response.

Before the coronavirus pandemic, critics warned of the potential for excessive state surveillance reminiscent of the all-seeing "Big Brother" in George Orwell's novel "1984".

"The security argument is the one always used to justify loss of privacy and personal liberty,

That's where the greatest problem and the greatest danger lie," said French cybersecurity researcher Baptiste Robert.

Rights activist and lawyer Alyona Popova launched legal action against the use of facial recognition at an authorised opposition protest in September last year. She said cameras were attached to metal detectors that every participant had to pass through.

"The massive use of facial recognition technology amounts to state surveillance of its citizens and the state will certainly use it against political opponents," she said.