

U.S. could become virus epicentre: WHO

Trump says he wants to reopen the country for business in weeks, not months; U.K. enforces lockdown

REUTERS
GENEVA/LONDON

The World Health Organisation said on Tuesday that the U.S. could become the global epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Britain joined the ranks of countries in lockdown to try to hold back the virus, and data showed business activity collapsing from Australia and Japan and Western Europe at a record pace in March, with the U.S. showing expected to be just as dire.

But amid the gathering gloom, the Chinese province of Hubei, where the virus was first identified in December, said it would lift travel restrictions on people leaving the region as the epidemic eases there.

Confirmed COVID-19 cases around the world exceeded 3,77,000 across 194 countries and territories as of early Tuesday, according to a Reuters tally, more than 16,500 of them fatal.

'Very large acceleration'
WHO spokeswoman Margaret Harris said there had been a "very large acceleration" in infections in the U.S.

Over the previous 24 hours, 85% of new cases were in Europe and the U.S., and of those, 40% were in the U.S. As of Monday, the virus had infected more than 42,000 people there, killing at least 559.

Asked whether the U.S. could become the new epicentre, Ms. Harris said: "We are now seeing a very large acceleration in cases in the U.S. So it does have that potential."

Some U.S. state and local officials have decried a lack of coordinated federal action, saying that having localities act on their own has put them in competition for supplies.

President Donald Trump



Looming crisis: U.S. President Donald Trump addressing the media in Washington. •AP

Pak. officials in soup for selfie with patient

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
KARACHI

Pakistan has suspended six civil servants after they posed for a selfie with a COVID-19 patient in a quarantine centre, an official said Tuesday.

The selfie – widely shared on social media – pictured a group of men around the apparent patient, several of them smiling broadly and none wearing face masks. The picture was taken at a quarantine facility in Sindh province..

said on Monday he was considering how to restart business life when a 15-day shutdown ends next week.

"America will again and soon be open for business," Mr. Trump told a White House news conference on Monday. "We are not going to let it turn into a long-lasting financial problem."

In Europe, retirement homes are a 'timebomb'

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
MADRID

In Italy, Spain and France, old people's homes have been ravaged by COVID-19 with the elderly and the infirm taking the brunt of the epidemic as it spreads like wildfire across Europe.

"When the virus enters these places, it inevitably turns into a massacre, as unfortunately is already happening in different parts of Italy," Italian pensioners' union SPI-Cgil said this weekend.

"Retirement homes are

ticking time bombs, with 500,000 elderly people in very fragile conditions at risk of being infected."

And there is a similar situation in Spain. "In some places, the Army found some elderly people completely abandoned, sometimes even dead in their beds," said Spanish Defence Minister Margarita Robles.

In France, the epidemic "could end up causing more than 1,00,000 deaths," the main associations representing elderly care homes have warned.

"We can't have the cure be worse than the problem," Mr. Trump said. "We have to open our country because that causes problems that, in my opinion, could be far bigger problems."

Of the top 10 countries by case numbers, Italy has reported the highest fatality rate, at around 10%, which at

least partly reflects its older population. The fatality rate globally is around 4.3%, though national figures can vary widely according to how much testing is done.

Britain on Tuesday began curbs on movement without precedent in peacetime after PM Boris Johnson ordered everyone to stay at home.

China to lift travel curbs on 50 million people in Hubei

Healthy residents would be allowed to leave the province

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BEIJING

China announced on Tuesday that a lockdown would be lifted on more than 50 million people in central Hubei province, where the coronavirus first emerged late last year.

But fears rose over a second wave of infections in the country fuelled by people arriving from overseas.

After two months living with draconian curbs on daily life, residents will be allowed to leave Hubei from midnight on Tuesday if healthy, said provincial authorities.

Restrictions till April 7
Wuhan city – the initial epicentre of the outbreak – will end restrictions from April 8.

Hubei ordered the shutdown in January but has



Travel eased: Staff members line up as they prepare to spray disinfectant at the Wuhan railway station on Tuesday. •AFP

been gradually easing rules and permitting people to move about within the province and return to work.

People who wish to travel in or out of Hubei or Wuhan will be able to as long as they have a "green" health code issued by authorities, but schools will remain closed.

Three airports in the province will resume flights

from Wednesday, state broadcaster CCTV reported. "I'm super happy," Hubei native Zoe Wang told AFP.

"I'm going to be able to go back and see my parents."

"I really want freedom as soon as possible," one Wuhan resident named Willa said.

New cases have slowed over the last month.

'Loss of smell in some cases'

Experts say this might be a new way to detect the virus

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
PARIS

From a mother unable to smell her baby's nappy to a lawmaker who suddenly could not taste food, some COVID-19 patients have described a loss of olfactory senses – and experts say this might be a new way to detect the virus.

Ear, nose and throat (ENT) specialists in Britain, the U.S. and France have noted a growing number of patients in recent weeks with anosmia – the abrupt loss of smell – and have said this could be a sign of COVID-19 in people who other-



wise appear well.

The World Health Organisation lists the most common signs of COVID-19 as fever, tiredness and dry cough.

In Britain, ENT doctors have urged health authorities to advise people with a sudden loss of smell or taste

to self-isolate even if they have no other symptoms. "Anything we can do to delay transmission is absolutely vital," Claire Hopkins, the president of the British Rhinological Society, told AFP.

Ms. Hopkins, who published an open letter on the issue on Friday with ENT U.K. chief Nirmal Kumar, said she was not surprised when she heard initial reports from Iran and France of COVID-19 patients reporting a loss of smell.

Around 40% of cases of sudden loss of smell in adults are caused by post-viral anosmia, she said.

ELSEWHERE



Pompeo slashes \$1 bn aid to Afghanistan

DOHA
U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Monday slashed \$1 billion in aid to Afghan government after a mission to Kabul failed to bridge a divide between feuding leaders. Mr. Pompeo made the surprise trip in hopes of reviving a landmark U.S. accord with the Taliban. •AFP

Jihadist ambush kills at least 70 Nigerian soldiers

KANO
At least 70 Nigerian soldiers were killed in an ambush on their convoy by jihadist fighters in the restive northeast, military and security sources said on Tuesday. Insurgents fired rocket-propelled grenades at a lorry carrying troops as it travelled near Gorgi village in Borno state on Monday, said two military officers. •AFP

Mahinda convenes all-party meet on COVID-19 preparedness

MPs suggest reconvening of House for better coordination

MEERA SRINIVASAN
COLOMBO

As Sri Lanka's Parliament stands dissolved since early March, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa convened an all-party leaders' meeting on Tuesday to discuss the government's ongoing strategies in combating COVID-19 that has affected over 100 persons so far.

"I emphasised the need of working together to successfully battle #COVID19. All present were in agreement and pledged full support. #TogetherWeCan #COVID19SL," Mr. Rajapaksa said in a tweet.

Meanwhile, some participants suggested that the Prime Minister and the government consider reconvening Parliament to help MPs coordinate better in districts. Tamil National Al-

liance spokesman M.A. Sumanthiran said in a tweet: "Reconvening #Parliament was raised at the Party Leaders' Mtg by @RauffHakeem [Sri Lanka Muslim Congress Leader] and myself. It is not necessary to meet physically in one place but it is important to have an active Parliament so that feedback from the people are received and for better accountability." While there has been no official response yet, Mr. Sumanthiran tweeted that there was a "favourable response" to his suggestion.

President Gotabaya Rajapaksa dissolved Parliament and announced general elections for April 25 that now stand indefinitely postponed.

Sri Lankan public health authorities, along with a national task force being head-

ed by the Army commander, has implemented various measures, including an enforced curfew in the country. Over 2,000 people have been arrested since Friday for violating it.

When the curfew was temporarily lifted on Tuesday morning, long queues were seen outside supermarkets but adequate arrangements were made to manage the crowd.

The government said it is organising door-to-door delivery of essentials in capital Colombo, Gampaha and Kalthara districts.

Meanwhile, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa has asked legal experts and the Department of Prisons to explore the possibility of granting some relief to the prisoners who were charged with minor offences.

Bangladesh to release Khaleda Zia

Former PM's family had sought her release following the virus outbreak

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
DHAKA

Bangladesh on Tuesday initiated a process to "conditionally" release jailed former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia for six months following the COVID-19 outbreak in the country.

The 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," Law Minister Anisul 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.

Freedom for 6 months

"... Zia will be released for a period of six months and she must stay in her own house," the Minister said.

He declined to elaborate



A file photo of Khaleda Zia in Dhaka. •AP

immediately but officials familiar with the process said the Home Ministry would take subsequent steps for the former premier's temporary release under a criminal procedure code (CrPC).

Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal said his office would take steps for the release of Zia, who is being treated for old-age complications at the prison cell of a

State-run specialised hospital, "as soon as" they receive the file from the Law Ministry.

The development came a day after Zia's family sought her release over the COVID-19 outbreak.

"This is a decision we welcome," BNP leader Ruhul Kabir Rizvi told reporters in brief comments at the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University here.

"I thank Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina," Zia's younger sister Selima Islam said. Zia served thrice as the premier since 1991. Her party suffered a miserable defeat in the 2018 elections bagging only six seats in 300-seat parliament.

Her conviction on "moral turpitude" charges debarred her from contesting the polls.

She was sent to jail in February 2018 by a local court on charges of embezzling foreign donations meant for an orphanage, named after her slain husband and President Ziaur Rahman, during her premiership between 2001 and 2006.

Rehman, a military ruler-turned-politician, was the founder of the BNP.

She was convicted in another corruption case later the same year, though her party claims both cases are politically motivated.

China told to reverse decision to expel scribes

NYT, WSJ and Post emphasise the need for free flow of information from Country

MARC TRACY

The publishers of *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Washington Post* on Tuesday released a statement critical of the Chinese government's decision to bar American journalists from working in China.

The unusual statement, signed by A.G. Sulzberger of *The Times*, William Lewis of *The Journal* and Fred Ryan of *The Post*, was released online early Tuesday and was scheduled to appear in the rival newspapers' Tuesday print editions.

"We strongly urge the Chinese government to reverse its decision to force the Americans working for our news organisations to leave the country and, more broadly, to ease the growing crackdown on independent



Media freedom: NYT's journalist Steven Lee Myers, centre, with other journalists in Beijing, in this file photo. •AFP

news organisations that preceded this action," the publishers said in the statement. "The media is collateral damage in a diplomatic dispute between the Chinese and U.S. governments, threatening to deprive the world of critical information at a perilous moment."

On Wednesday, China announced that all American

journalists at the three newspapers based in the country whose credentials were set to expire in 2020 had to hand in their press cards within 10 days. The action would affect at least 13 journalists.

China's move was the latest in an escalating diplomatic feud between the Chinese government, led by President Xi Jinping, and the

Trump administration. The ouster of the American journalists followed the Trump administration's decision to limit to 100 the number of Chinese citizens who can work in the U.S. for five state-run Chinese media organisations.

The letter from the three publishers emphasized the need for a free flow of information during the coronavirus crisis. "This move – made in retaliation for recent expulsions by the U.S. government – is one that we would protest under any circumstances," the publishers wrote.

"But it is uniquely damaging and reckless as the world continues the struggle to control this disease, a struggle that will require the free flow of reliable news and information." NY TIMES

64 found dead in container in Mozambique

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
MAPUTO

More than 60 suspected undocumented migrants from Ethiopia were found dead on Tuesday in a cargo container in Mozambique's northwest Tete province, a senior hospital official said.

"A truck transporting illegal immigrants from Malawi, suspected to be Ethiopians, was stopped at the Mussacana weight bridge in Tete, and 64 people were found dead. Only 14 survived," an official said on condition of anonymity.

"The cause of death is presumed to be asphyxiation."

The victims were discovered in a blue cargo container loaded on to a haulage truck, according to pictures seen by AFP.

Albert Uderzo, co-creator of Asterix and Obelix, is dead

He and Rene Goscinny together created 24 comic books

ASSOCIATED PRESS
PARIS

Albert Uderzo, one of the two creators of the beloved comic book series *Asterix and Obelix*, who captured the spirit of the Gauls of yore and grew a reputation worldwide, died on Tuesday. He was 92. The French press quoted family members as saying that Mr. Uderzo died of a heart attack in the Paris suburb of Neuilly.

Asterix, portrayed as a short man with a droopy mustache always wearing a helmet with wings, was created in the early 1960s by Mr. Uderzo and Rene Goscinny. The character lived in a village in Gaul, present-day France, resisting Roman



Albert Uderzo

conquerors, along with his inseparable big-bellied friend, Obelix.

"Albert Uderzo died in his sleep at his Neuilly home of a heart attack with no links to the coronavirus," the French press quoted his son-in-law,

Bernard de Choisy, as saying. "He had been very tired for several weeks."

Mr. Uderzo initially illustrated the characters created along with writer Rene Goscinny. Together, they created 24 comic books. After Goscinny's death in 1977, Mr. Uderzo also took over the comic books' writing duties, deciding to continue without his creative partner.

Goscinny's daughter, Anne, called the two men "brothers". "They were as different as fire and water, but they lived something that few among us could live," she told the French daily *Le Parisien*. "They were the kind of friends you don't often have in life."