

15 THE OUTBREAK THE WORLD

PANDEMIC WATCH



Priti Patel

UNITED KINGDOM
Priti Patel looks at measures akin to India

London: UK Home Secretary Priti Patel is keen to close UK borders to passengers from global hotspots such as US, Iran and China, similar to moves taken by India, as per a report. The Indian-origin Cabinet minister feels visitors from certain countries should not be continuing to fly into the UK when the government has put the country in lockdown to halt the pandemic, which has claimed 465 lives across Britain. Patel is seeking cross-government support for the move that would stop the daily flights from Tehran, New York and Los Angeles and Beijing, claimed a 'Daily Telegraph' report.

NEPAL
Key border points with China to open

Kathmandu: Nepal has decided to reopen its key border points with China to ease the supply of essential goods in the wake of the pandemic. A high-level committee led by Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Ishwar Pokhrel has decided to reopen two border points with China by completing the necessary protocols at the earliest, the officials said Thursday. The border points were closed due to the devastating earthquakes of 2015. The decision to open the key border points comes at a time when the country is facing a total lockdown amid fears of coronavirus spread.

AUSTRALIA
Virus-stricken ship told to leave

Sydney: A cruise ship stricken by the outbreak was told Thursday to leave Australian waters, days after local infection numbers spiked when passengers on another vessel were allowed to disembark. Seven passengers have tested positive for COVID-19 aboard the Artania, which had been due to travel onward to South Africa but is now anchored near Fremantle. Western Australian Premier Mark McGowan said he would ask the national government to call in the navy if the ship refused to move on from Australian waters. "This ship needs to leave immediately," he said.

G20 leaders plan \$5-tn economy boost

Put human feelings, not economic targets, at centre of global fight against pandemic: PM Modi

SHUBHAJIT ROY
NEW DELHI, MARCH 26

NOTING THE "alarming social and economic costs" to the novel coronavirus pandemic, Prime Minister Narendra Modi asked G20 leaders to put "human beings", and not "economic targets" at the centre of the global cooperation to fight the disease.

At the end of the two-and-a-half hour virtual G20 summit — which was not on a purely economic agenda — the leaders decided to inject "\$5 trillion into the global economy".

"We are injecting over \$5 trillion into the global economy, as part of targeted fiscal policy, economic measures, and guarantee schemes to counteract the social, economic and financial impacts of the pandemic," a joint communique of the G20 leaders said. The leaders also agreed to contribute to the WHO-led COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund on a voluntary basis.

According to an Indian government source, the G20 summit did not include any reference to the origin of the crisis. This was in response to a possible face-off between US and Chinese leaders.

Modi, in his remarks, noted that 90 per cent of the COVID-19 cases and 88 per cent of deaths were in G20 countries, even as they share 80 per cent of the world GDP and 60 per cent of the world population. He called on the G20 to come out with a concrete action plan.

The PM underscored the need to "freely and openly share the benefits of medical research and development", "develop adaptive, responsive and humane health care systems", promote "new crisis management protocols and procedures for an interconnected global village", strengthen and reform intergovernmental organisations like the WHO and work together to reduce economic hardships resulting from COVID-19, particularly for the economically weak, a statement by the Ministry of External Affairs said.

He also called on leaders to



Prime Minister Narendra Modi addresses other G20 leaders during a virtual summit, in New Delhi on Thursday. NSA Ajit Doval and External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar were also present. ANI

help usher in a new globalisation for the collective well-being of humankind and have multilateral focus on promoting the shared interests of humanity.

As per a source, Modi told G20 leaders that, in many senses, "globalisation had failed us", the multilateral fora had become a platform to "balance competing individual interests, rather than the collective interests of all humankind", whether it was "combating terrorism or climate change".

"Thousands of precious lives have been lost to this crisis", Modi is learnt to have told G20 leaders. And, even three months after the crisis, he said, "We are still looking, working, trying to find a coordinated response".

Although the G20 summit shows the international community "can come together", but "it has taken some time for it to respond to a crisis of this magnitude and damage", the source re-

called Modi telling the leaders.

The summit was chaired by Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud.

Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed that a "G20 health ministers' meeting be convened as quickly as possible to improve information sharing, strengthen cooperation on drugs, vaccines and epidemic control, and cut off cross-border infections". "G20 members need to jointly help developing countries with weak public health systems enhance preparedness and response. I propose a G20 COVID-19 assistance initiative for better information sharing and policy and action coordination with the support of the World Health Organisation," he said.

He also said China will be more than ready to share its practices, conduct joint research and development of drugs and vaccines, and provide assistance

where it can. "We need to make a collective response for control and treatment at the international level. This is a virus that respects no borders," Xi said.

"I want to call on all G20 members to take collective actions — cutting tariffs, removing barriers, and facilitating the unfettered flow of trade. Together, we can send a strong signal and restore confidence for global economic recovery. The G20 needs to draw up an action plan and promptly set up communication mechanisms and institutional arrangements for anti-epidemic macro-policy coordination," the Chinese President said.

The G20 communique said, "We will continue to conduct bold and large-scale fiscal support. Collective G20 action will amplify its impact, ensure coherence, and harness synergies. The magnitude and scope of this response will get the global economy back on its

feet and set a strong basis for the protection of jobs and the recovery of growth..."

Saudi King Salman said the impact of the pandemic has spread to reach the global economy, financial markets, trade, and global supply chains, hampering growth and development and reversing the gains accomplished in the previous years. On the trade front, the G20 must send a "strong signal" to restore confidence in the global economy by resuming, as soon as possible, the normal flow of goods and services, he said.

"The G20 has previously proven its effectiveness in mitigating the severity of the global financial crisis and its ability to overcome it. Today, through our cooperation, we are confident that we, together, will overcome this crisis, and move forward towards a future where all people thrive, prosper and are healthy," he said.

3.3 mn in US claim unemployment; Senate approves \$2-tn aid package

EMILY COCHRANE & NICHOLAS FANDOS
WASHINGTON, MARCH 26

THE \$2 TRILLION economic stabilisation package agreed to by Congress and the Trump administration early Wednesday morning is the largest of its kind in modern American history, intended to respond to the coronavirus pandemic and provide direct payments and jobless benefits for individuals, money for states and a huge bailout fund for businesses.

The measure, which the Senate approved unanimously just before midnight on Wednesday is unprecedented in its sheer scope and size.

"This is certainly, in terms of dollars, by far and away the biggest ever, ever done," President Trump said at the White House, where he veered from his usual partisan vitriol and praised Democrats for their work on the agreement. "That is a tremendous thing because a lot of this money

goes to jobs, jobs, jobs — and families, families, families."

More than three million people filed for unemployment benefits in the US last week, sending a collective shudder throughout the economy that is unlike anything Americans have experienced.

In the half-century that the government has tracked applications, the worst week ever was 695,000 "initial" claims. That was in October 1982.

The latest numbers, released by the Labour Department on Thursday, are some of the first hard data on the economic toll of the coronavirus pandemic, which has shut down whole swathes of American life faster than government statistics can keep track.

Just three weeks ago, barely 200,000 people applied for jobless benefits, a historically low number. The sudden rush of layoffs has led to jammed phone lines and overwhelmed computer servers at unemployment offices across the country, leaving many people unable to file claims. NYT

WHAT THE LEGISLATION ENTAILS

- Direct payments of \$1,200 to millions of Americans, including those earning up to \$75,000, and an additional \$500 per child
- \$377 billion in federally guaranteed loans to small businesses and a \$500 billion government lending program for distressed companies
- \$100 billion to hospitals



on the front lines of the pandemic. Expand duration of jobless aid and extending payments for the first time to freelancers and gig workers

WHO sees encouraging signs in Europe: 'Marathon, not sprint'

AGENCIES
MARCH 26

THE WORLD Health Organisation's European office said Thursday it saw "encouraging signs" as Italy reported a lower rate of infections of the new coronavirus, cautioning it was too soon to say whether the worst had passed.

"While the situation remains very serious, we are starting to see some encouraging signs," WHO regional director for Europe, Hans Kluge, told a press conference.

"Italy, which has the highest number of cases in the region, has just seen a slightly lower rate of increase, though it is still too early to say that the pandemic is peaking in that country," he added.

According to Kluge they will soon be able to determine the degree to which those measures have had an impact.

But Kluge also cautioned governments and citizens to be aware of the "new reality" created



Medical staff prepare to transfer COVID-19 patients from Strasbourg to hospitals in western parts of France. Reuters

by the pandemic and prepare for the long term impact. "This is not going to be a sprint, this is going to be a marathon," Kluge said.

The number of declared coronavirus cases in Europe topped 250,000, more than half of which are in Italy and Spain, according to an AFP tally Thursday.

"We are collapsing," said Lidia Perera, a nurse who works at Madrid's Hospital de la Paz. "We need more workers." She

said watching patients die alone is "killing all of us inside."

In Italy, doctors and nurses have been begging the government daily to provide more masks, gloves and goggles and urged the public to understand how important onerous social distancing measures really are.

"Please don't leave us alone. Help us help you," Dr Francesca De Gennaro, who heads a small medical clinic in Italy.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC: FOUR KEY FIGURES

\$33.17 bn
The package unveiled by Singapore to support its workers and businesses amid measures to deal with economic fallout

1.5 bn
The number of students missing school during the outbreak. The UN has enlisted tech firms, NGOs to find remedies

500,000
The number of people who signed up as volunteers within 24 hours of a govt appeal to help the NHS

500,000
The number of tests per week that Germany conducts, a virologist said, adding early detection was key

WHO sided with China, says Trump; Beijing praises its role

K J M VARMA & LALIT K JHA
BEIJING/WASHINGTON, MARCH 26

THE WAR of words between the US and China over the origins of the deadly coronavirus has extended to the WHO as Chinese President Xi Jinping praised its role in advancing global battle against COVID-19 amid his American counterpart Donald Trump's criticism that the UN health agency sided with Beijing and people are unhappy with its position.

President Xi on Thursday appreciated the World Health Organisation (WHO) Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus' efforts to advance the global battle against the COVID-19 pandemic. Under Ghebreyesus' leadership, the WHO has been actively advancing global cooperation against the contagious illness and gained wide recognition from the international community, Xi said.

China, he added, will con-



US President Donald Trump at the White House. Reuters

tinue to firmly support Ghebreyesus and the WHO.

Xi's praise of WHO and Ghebreyesus' leadership came after Trump said the UN health body has "very much sided" with China on the coronavirus crisis and claimed that many are unhappy with the "very unfair" praise by the agency on Beijing's handling of the outbreak.

President Trump was responding to a question on allegations by Republican Senator Marco Rubio that the WHO showed "favouritism" to China

E. Worries of backlash

THE US-CHINA war of words has worried many at a time when a heightened level of global cooperation is needed. Reports of the US moving from words to action has heightened such worries, given that China is a key exporter of medical goods to the US. Experts said such a "demonisation contest" can only damage efforts to combat the virus.

where the disease originated.

"It (WHO) has been very very much sided with China. A lot of people are not happy about it," Trump said at a White House news conference on Wednesday.

Stop congregational prayers to save lives: Al-Azhar fatwa

SAJJAD HUSSAIN
ISLAMABAD, MARCH 26

A TOP global Islamic body has issued a fatwa (religious edict) on the request of Pakistan President Dr Arif Alvi, empowering the head of the state to suspend Friday prayers in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak.

The fatwa issued on Wednesday by the Grand Imam Shaikh of Egypt's Jamia Al Azhar, an authority on Islamic injunctions, and the Supreme Council in Egypt, said public gatherings, including congregational prayers at mosques, could result in spread of coronavirus and the governments of Muslim countries had full juris-

diction to cancel such events.

"I am thankful to Grand Imam Shaikh of Al-Azhar and Supreme Council for responding to my personal request to provide guidance to us with regard to Farz Jamaat & Juma prayers in mosques during coronavirus attack," the president tweeted on Wednesday.

Alvi asked clerics in Pakistan to act as per the principles of Islam from Quran and Sunnah, and said it purely Islamic to cancel Friday prayers over coronavirus concerns, The News reported.

"Countries that have stopped congregational prayers are UAE, Saudi, Iran, Algeria, Tunisia, Jordan, Kuwait, Palestine, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon and Egypt," he said. PTI

'THIS IS A MASSIVE, MASSIVE RETURN — SIMPLY OVERWHELMING'

Afghan returnees from Iran raise fears of another Wuhan

FATIMA FAIZI & DAVID ZUCCHINO
HERAT, MARCH 26

AFGHANISTAN HAS already imported its epidemic. And each day it adds to it, as thousands more displaced Afghans continue to flow across the border from Iran, which has reported among the world's highest numbers of Covid-19 cases and deaths.

The returnees, some surely infected with the coronavirus when in Iran, cluster shoulder to shoulder in massive crowds on both sides of the crossing,

where toilet facilities are primitive and soap and potable water are scarce.

Later, they climb aboard overloaded taxis, buses and minivans for the two-hour trip to Herat city, the sprawling and crowded hub of western Afghanistan, where they sleep in packed hostels and cramped rooms behind restaurants.

From Herat, tens of thousands of the new arrivals have boarded more overloaded buses and vans en route to Kabul, the capital. From there, they have returned to crowded homes in Kabul or traveled onward to out-



People returning from Iran cross into Afghanistan. NYT

lying provinces — potential vectors for spreading the virus.

More than 115,000 Afghans returned from Iran just between