

# Coronavirus deaths cross 1,000 in U.S.

## Senate passes \$2.2 trillion economic package steering aid to businesses, workers & healthcare systems

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
NEW YORK

U.S. deaths from the COVID-19 pandemic topped 1,000 in another grim milestone for a global outbreak that is taking lives and wreaking havoc on economies and the established routines of ordinary life.

In a recognition of the scale of the threat, the Senate late on Wednesday passed an unparalleled \$2.2 trillion economic rescue package steering aid to businesses, workers and healthcare systems.

The unanimous vote came despite misgivings on both sides about whether it goes too far or not far enough and capped days of difficult negotiations as Washington confronted a national challenge unlike it has ever faced. The 880-page measure is the largest economic relief bill in the U.S. history.

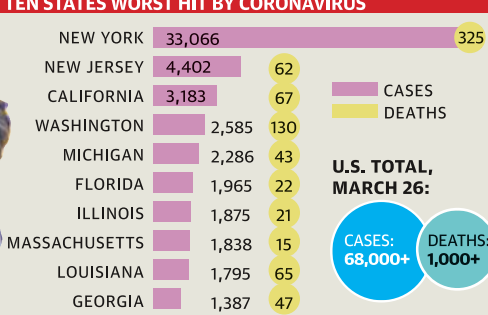
Worldwide, the death toll climbed past 22,000, according to a running count kept by Johns Hopkins University,



### Massive surge

With COVID-19 cases rising rapidly, the U.S. could overtake Europe as the new epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to the World Health Organization

DATA AS AT 11:00GMT, MARCH 26  
TEN STATES WORST HIT BY CORONAVIRUS



### NEW CASES ANNOUNCED IN UNITED STATES EACH DAY

10,000

President Donald Trump has called for Americans to dedicate themselves to social distancing for 15 days, including staying home from work and closing bars and restaurants

### MANY LOSE JOBS

1 Unemployment benefit filings by U.S. workers surged to 3.3 million last week, the highest number ever recorded

2 Rise compares to 281,000 filings in the prior week and blows away the previous record of 695,000 set in October 1982

SOURCES: WHO, NEW YORK TIMES, JOHNS HOPKINS

## WHO Europe sees 'encouraging signs'

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
COPENHAGEN

The World Health Organization's European office said on 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.

WHO Europe said that to date over 220,000 cases of COVID-19 had been reported on the continent, along with 11,987 deaths.

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.

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## Ex-FBI agent missing for 13 years died in Iran: kin

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
WASHINGTON

A former FBI agent who mysteriously vanished in 2007 died in Iranian custody, his family has concluded, saying U.S. intelligence had made them give up 13 years of hope.

President Donald Trump did not confirm Bob Levinson's death, saying that Iran had not communicated any news on the former agent, who would have turned 72 this month.

But Mr. Levinson's family said on Wednesday that it had learned that he was dead, although it gave no information on how or when.

The father of seven vanished in March 2007 in Kish, an island that has more le-

nient visa rules than the rest of Iran, and was said to have been investigating cigarette counterfeiting.

But *The Washington Post* reported in 2013 that Mr. Levinson, who had retired from the CIA and had gone on a rogue mission aimed at gathering intelligence on Iran.

It said at the time that the CIA paid \$2.5 million to Mr. Levinson's wife Christine, accepting responsibility for his disappearance.

Iran implicitly denied on Thursday that Mr. Levinson had died in its custody, restating its longstanding position that he left the Islamic republic "years ago for an unknown destination".

That means that globally, roughly six out of every 10 cases and seven out of 10 deaths have been reported in Europe, with the number of confirmed infections worldwide now over 4,00,000.

Mr. Kluge cautioned governments and citizens to be aware of the "new reality" created 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."

"I'd like to say, let's get back to work next Friday," said Joe Biden, the front-runner for the Democratic presidential nomination. "That'd be wonderful. But it can't be arbitrary."

Mr. Biden said the congressional aid package addressing the outbreak "goes a long way," but that "meticulous oversight" is required.

## Germany tests up to 500,000 people a week

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
BERLIN

Germany is testing up to 500,000 people a week, a virologist said on Thursday, adding that early detection has been key in keeping the country's death rate relatively low.

The country has more than 36,000 declared cases of the virus, but has managed to avoid the high death rates seen in hard-hit Italy and Spain. At 0.54%, Germany's death rate is far lower than Italy's rate of around 10% and Spain's fatality rate of 7.3% percent.

Experts say widespread testing and tracing of cases is key to limiting the spread of the disease, an approach adopted in South Korea, where the outbreak has largely been contained.

## Spain virus death toll tops 4,000

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
MADRID

The death toll in Spain surged to 4,089 after 655 people died within 24 hours, the Health Ministry said on Thursday.

It was a 19% rise on figures released on Wednesday in the country, which has the world's second highest death toll from the disease after Italy. The number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 rose to 56,188.

Despite a lockdown imposed on March 14, which Parliament on Thursday agreed to extend until April 11, both deaths and infections have continued to mount. But the rise in the number of new deaths was smaller than that recorded on Wednesday, when the figure rose by 738.

## Chinese city eases lockdown but life is far from normal

### Warnings remind people that the virus still poses a threat

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
HUANGGANG

Banners warning that playing cards together is suicide and guards yelling at crowds to separate: a Chinese city near the coronavirus ground zero remains far from normal even after emerging from a two-month lockdown.

Huanggang, home to 7.5 million people, was among the worst-affected areas in Hubei, the province where the new coronavirus first emerged late last year.

Travel restrictions were loosened on Wednesday and – if healthy – people were allowed to leave Hubei, where more than 50 million people were placed under lockdown in January to prevent the spread of the virus.

### 'Not safe'

But warnings were prominently displayed across Huanggang city to remind people that the virus still posed a threat. "If you don't wear a mask, the virus will fall in love with you," said a banner.

Restaurants re-opened – but diners weren't allowed to eat inside. Instead, delivery drivers collected takeout orders, as a handful of customers ate at tables outside.



Safety first: A security personnel checking the temperature of people getting into a mall in Huanggang, China. • AFP

Nearly 3,000 people were infected and 125 died in Huanggang, which is now considered a low-risk area.

Like other regions in the province, people can travel in and out of the city if they have a "green" health status on a special phone app.

But despite the easing of restrictions, Huanggang is still on edge, and officials repeatedly said the situation was still "not safe".

A closed field hospital is a testament to the vast changes the city has already gone through. The Dabieshan Medical Center was under construction when the epidemic broke out, but new walls and equipment were rapidly drafted in to make it suitable for treating infectious diseases. The final pa-

tients were discharged last week and now the empty hospital is dark and deserted. Protective equipment lay on the ground, with abandoned quilts and flasks next to beds in empty wards.

Du Zhiqiang, who is in charge of the hospital's construction, said the power had been turned off after it was decommissioned as a COVID-19 facility.

Many Huanggang residents, however, jumped at the chance to go out.

Chen Wenjun, a 22-year-old pharmacist, ate near a street food stall with two friends. She said she was happy to finally be out, but was not letting her guard down: "Even though a lot of things have been opened, we still need to take care."

## Terror charge slapped on man for coughing near supermarket worker

NEIL VIGDOR  
NEW YORK

A New Jersey man was charged with making a terrorist threat after he intentionally coughed near a supermarket employee and told her he had the coronavirus, the authorities said on the same day that the Justice Department warned of similar threats to spread the virus.

The man, George Falcone, 50, of Freehold, New Jersey, was shopping for

groceries at a Wegmans store in Manalapan, New Jersey, on Sunday evening when a worker asked him to move away from her and a food display because he was too close, the State Attorney General, Gurbir Grewal, said on Tuesday.

The authorities said that Mr. Falcone leaned in close to the worker to cough and allegedly laughed, telling her that he was infected with the virus.

Mr. Falcone later told two

other store employees that they were lucky to have jobs, officials said.

Mr. Falcone was charged with making a terrorist threat in the third degree and fourth-degree of obstructing administration of law, Mr. Grewal said. Both charges are considered felonies in New Jersey.

Mr. Falcone would face up to seven years in prison and a fine of up to \$26,000 if convicted on all charges, Mr. Grewal said. NYTIMES

## ELSEWHERE



### Two rockets hit Iraq's Green Zone

QAIYARAH BASE

Two rockets slammed into the Iraqi capital's high-security Green Zone early on Thursday, hours before U.S.-led forces were set to pull out of a second base in the country. Some 7,500 troops are in Iraq as part of the U.S.-led coalition helping local troops fight jihadist remnants, but those numbers are being significantly drawn down this month. A security source said the intended target appeared to be the US Embassy, a sprawling compound a few hundred metres south on the banks of the Tigris. AFP

## U.S. indicts Maduro for 'narco-terrorism'

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
WASHINGTON

The US Justice Department announced the indictment on Thursday of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and offered a \$15 million reward for information leading to his capture.

The Justice Department called Mr. Maduro the head of a cocaine trafficking group called "The Cartel of the Suns" that exported hundreds of tonnes of drugs working hand in hand with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, which the U.S. has officially labelled a "terrorist organization."

Also indicted were more than a dozen other officials of the Maduro regime, including members of the Venezuelan military and judi-



Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro

ciary, including the country's Chief Justice.

For more than 20 years, Maduro and a number of high-ranking colleagues allegedly conspired with the FARC, causing tons of cocaine to enter and devastate American communities," said Attorney General Bill Barr. "It's time to call out this regime for what it is," he said.

## Big tech could emerge stronger from virus crisis

### With people told to work from home, the pandemic has deepened reliance on services from the biggest tech companies

DAISUKE WAKABAYASHI  
JACK NICAS  
OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA

While the rest of the economy is tanking from the crippling effects of the coronavirus, business at the biggest technology companies is holding steady – even thriving.

Amazon said it was hiring 100,000 warehouse workers to meet surging demand. Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook's chief executive, said traffic for video calling and messaging had exploded. Microsoft said the numbers using its software for online collaboration had climbed nearly 40% in a week.

With people told to work from home and stay away from others, the pandemic has deepened reliance on

services from the technology industry's biggest companies. Amazon has muscled in on brick-and-mortar retailers for years, but shoppers now reluctant to go to the store are turning to the e-commerce giant for a wider variety of goods, like groceries and over-the-counter drugs.

### New audience

Streaming services like Netflix have dampened box office sales for movies in recent years. Now, as movie theatres close under government orders, Netflix and YouTube are gaining a new audience.

Companies were already dumping their own data centres to rent computing from Amazon, Microsoft and



Structural shift: The shutdown of movie theaters is sending viewers to streaming services like Netflix and YouTube. • NYT

Google. That shift is likely to speed up as millions of employees are forced to work from home.

Even Apple, which once appeared to be among the U.S. companies most at risk from the coronavirus because of its dependence on

Chinese factories and consumers, appears to be on good footing. Many of Apple's factories are nearly back to normal, people are spending more time and money on its digital services, and on Wednesday it even released new gadgets.

That's not to say to major technology companies shouldn't be worried. Advertising, the lifeblood of Google and Facebook, tends to suffer during economic downturns. The stocks of Apple, Microsoft, Amazon, Facebook and Google's parent company, Alphabet, have collectively lost more than \$1 trillion in market value from a month ago.

Beyond the biggest companies, it is more of a struggle. Communication tools like videoconferencing service Zoom are now essential, but ride-hailing firms like Uber and Lyft and property-rental sites like Airbnb are seeing customers vanish.

But when the economy does eventually improve, Big Tech could benefit from

changes in consumer habits. While Amazon has changed shopping habits for items like books, getting customers to trust it with groceries has been challenging. Now, as more people are forced to stay home, one of the last strongholds of physical retailing may be coming under pressure.

Stay-at-home orders are unsurprisingly increasing traffic to video streaming sites, apps and social media platforms. Downloads of Netflix's app – a proxy for traffic from the streaming site – jumped 66% in Italy, according to data from Sensor Tower, an app data company. In Spain, they rose 35%. In the U.S., where Netflix was already popular, there was a 9% bump. NYTIMES