

**R KELLY SEEKS RELEASE**  
R&B singer R Kelly has cited the novel coronavirus in asking a federal judge to free him from a federal jail in Chicago as he awaits trial on child pornography and other charges.



TOP OF THE WORLD

# US has most infections as virus tightens grip

**BERNARD GONDON, DAVID RISING & NICOLE WINFIELD**  
NEW YORK, MARCH 27

US CORONAVIRUS infections surged to top the world amid warnings that the pandemic is accelerating in cities like New York, Chicago and Detroit, while a record \$2.2 trillion emergency package received final approval Friday by Congress to help millions of newly unemployed Americans and struggling companies.

The massive bill, also passed by the Republican-controlled Senate late on Wednesday, now goes to Republican President Donald Trump who is expected to sign it into law.

The US now has more than 86,000 confirmed cases.

Analysts, however warned that all those infection figures could be low for reasons that varied in each nation.

"China numbers can't be trusted because the government lies," American political scientist Ian Bremmer, president of the Eurasia Group think-tank, said Friday in a tweet. "US numbers can't be trusted because the government can't produce enough tests."

New York state, the epicenter of the US outbreak, reported 100 more deaths in one day, accounting for almost 30% of the 1,300 fatalities nationwide. AP



US President Donald Trump leaves after addressing the coronavirus task force daily briefing as Dr Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, stands by, at the White House in Washington. Reuters/Jonathan Ernst

## More than 900 deaths in a day in Italy; UK PM tests positive

**DAVID RISING, MATT SEDENSKY & JILL LAWLESS**  
LONDON, MARCH 27

DEATHS SURGED in Italy and Spain on Friday, troubling new outbreak sites bubbled in the United States, and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson became the first leader of a major country to test positive for the coronavirus that has sickened more than a half-million people worldwide.

Italy recorded its single biggest rise in deaths, with 969 more victims, to bring its total number of fatalities to 9,134.

Meanwhile, Johnson's office said he was tested after showing mild symptoms for the coronavirus and is self-isolating and continuing to lead Britain's response to the pandemic. "Be in no doubt that I can continue, thanks to the wizardry of modern technology, to communicate with all my top team, to lead the national fightback against coronavirus," Johnson said in a video message, adding that he had a temperature and persistent cough.

British Health Secretary Matt Hancock, who has been at the forefront of nation's response to the outbreak, also was confirmed



Boris Johnson joins a national applause to salute health workers in London. AP/PTI

**E. Test for EU solidarity**

ANGER HAS mounted in Italy against the European Union over the delay in the announcement of financial measures to tackle the crisis. EU leaders discussed the issue on a video conference but failed to reach consensus. They did not back Italy's suggestion for a common debt instrument to tackle the outbreak. The crisis has now become another test for EU solidarity.

appears there is a stabilization," said Fernando Simon, the head of Spain's health emergency coordination center.

Epidemiologists warn that Italy's numbers are likely much higher than reported — perhaps by five times — although two weeks into a lockdown the daily increase seems to be slowing, at least in northern Italy. AP



Philippine president met officials who were exposed to those with coronavirus. AP file

**PHILIPPINES**  
Duterte in self-quarantine

Manila: Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte will quarantine for more than a week after meeting officials who were exposed to people with the coronavirus. Sen. Christopher Lawrence Go said Duterte will go into quarantine Saturday, the president's 75th birthday, to April 7. He will continue working in his residence at the presidential palace in Manila. A test cleared Duterte of the COVID-19 illness two weeks ago. But he has since had meetings with Cabinet members and other officials who have been exposed to infected people.

## China, US must unite to fight virus: Xi

**PRESS TRUST OF INDIA**  
BEIJING, MARCH 27

CHINA AND the United States should "unite to fight" the deadly coronavirus pandemic, President Xi Jinping said in a call with Donald Trump on Friday, as he called for the US to improve relations.

The two countries have clashed in recent weeks over the virus, and Chinese state media said Xi told Trump he hoped the



Chinese President spoke to Trump on Friday

"US will take substantive actions to improve Sino-US relations". He also called for the two countries to work together to tackle the virus and said Beijing "wishes to continue sharing all information and experience with the US", according to state broadcaster CCTV.

Trump sounded a positive tone, tweeting that he had a "very good conversation" with Xi, and that both leaders discussed the pandemic "in great detail".

Trump and his Secretary of State Mike Pompeo angered Beijing this month by repeatedly referring to "the Chinese virus" when discussing the COVID-19 outbreak.

## Indonesia nod to lockdowns after biggest surge in a day

**STANLEY WIDIANTO, BERNADETTE CHRISTINA & TOM ALLARD**  
JAKARTA, MARCH 27

INDONESIA'S CHIEF security minister Mahfud MD said on Friday the national government would allow regional authorities to impose lockdowns to control the coronavirus, in a major shift in strategy after previously resisting tougher restrictions.

The security chief also said the government was mulling a plan to ban "mudik" — the practice that sees millions of Indonesians leave towns and cities for their native villages at the end of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan in May.

The change of tack came after Indonesia, the world's fourth most populous nation, announced on



A woman stands inside a sterilisation chamber at the airport, in Surabaya. AP

Friday its biggest one-day surge in coronavirus cases, up 153 to 1,046.

Indonesia's government has previously been reluctant to embrace stricter containment strategies of other nations, and President Joko Widodo's policy has been to encourage social distancing while not imposing tighter restrictions on movement. REUTERS



## LOCKDOWN BEGINS IN SOUTH AFRICA

A soldier gestures to a homeless man, in Johannesburg. South Africa announced its first two deaths from the coronavirus Friday as the country's cases rose above 1,000 and a three-week lockdown began, with military patrolling and police screaming at the homeless on quiet streets. Reuters/Siphwe Sibeko

## In Iran, rumour that alcohol fights virus kills hundreds

**ASSOCIATED PRESS**  
TEHRAN, MARCH 27

STANDING OVER the still body of an intubated 5-year-old boy wearing nothing but a plastic diaper, an Iranian health care worker in a hazmat suit and mask begged the public for just one thing: Stop drinking industrial alcohol over fears about the new coronavirus.

The boy, now blind after his parents gave him toxic methanol in the mistaken belief it protects against the virus, is just one of hundreds of victims of an epidemic inside the pandemic now gripping Iran.

Iranian media report nearly 300 people have been killed and more than 1,000 sickened so far by ingesting methanol across the Islamic Republic, where drinking alcohol is banned and where those who do rely on bootleggers.

An Iranian doctor helping the country's Health Ministry told The Associated Press on Friday

the problem was even greater, giving a death toll of around 480 with 2,850 people sickened.

The poisonings come as fake remedies spread across social media in Iran, where people remain deeply suspicious of the government after it downplayed the crisis for days before it overwhelmed the country.

"Other countries have only one problem, which is the new coronavirus pandemic. But we are fighting on two fronts here," said Dr. Hossein Hassanian, an adviser to Iran's Health Ministry who gave the higher figures to the AP.

"We have to both cure the people with alcohol poisoning and also fight the coronavirus." The Islamic Republic has reported over 29,000 confirmed cases and more than 2,200 deaths from the virus, the highest toll of any country in the Middle East. International experts also fear Iran may be under-reporting its cases, as officials for days played down the virus ahead of a parliamentary election.

## Pak opens border with China as cases rise to nearly 1,300

**PRESS TRUST OF INDIA**  
ISLAMABAD, LAHORE, MARCH 27

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan on Friday announced to create a special volunteer force to help fight the coronavirus outbreak which has infected 1,298 people as Pakistan opened its borders with all-weather ally China for a day to accept much needed medical supplies.

The number of coronavirus patients in Pakistan has reached to 1,298, according to the latest data. There were 440 patients in Sindh, 419 in Punjab, 131 in Balochistan, 176 in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KP), 103 in Gilgit-Baltistan, 27 in Islamabad and 2 in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. So far, nine patients have died, 23 recovered and 7 others are in critical condition.

Interacting with the media after meeting of the National Core Committee on the coronavirus, Khan said that registration for Corona Relief Tiger Force will begin on March 31.

Meanwhile, China was providing critical medical supplies to Pakistan and the Khunjerab pass between the two countries was opened on Friday to let the goods enter Pakistan, according to the Chinese embassy in Islamabad.



Imran Khan announced a special volunteer force

## Russia confirms case in Putin's administration, tightens curbs

**TOM BALMFORTH & ALEXANDER MARROW**  
MOSCOW, MARCH 27

THE KREMLIN confirmed a coronavirus case in President Vladimir Putin's administration on Friday and the government said measures imposed in Moscow to fight the virus should be extended across Russia.

The official tally of confirmed cases jumped by a record daily amount for the third day in a row, bringing Russia's total to 1,036. Four people have died of the coronavirus.

The Kremlin said it was taking measures to stop the virus spread-



Kremlin said the person had not come into contact with Putin

from those selling food and medicine, until April 5. International flights have been suspended.

On Friday, Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin said measures in place in Moscow to halt the spread of the virus should be imposed across the country and urged Russians to stay at home and refrain from all but essential trips.

An opinion poll by the Moscow-based Levada Centre showed the majority of Russians, some 59 percent, do not believe the official figures. Twenty-four percent said they "absolutely" did not believe them and 35 percent said they only partially believed them, the poll showed. REUTERS



A temporary 2,000-bed hospital for coronavirus patients set up by the Iranian army at the international exhibition centre in northern Tehran. AP/PTI

# Migrant farmworkers whose harvests feed Europe blocked at borders

**LIZ ALDERMAN, MELISSA EDDY & AMIE TSANG**  
PARIS, MARCH 27

WHEN EUROPE tightened its borders to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, France's biggest farmers sounded an alarm: The workers they rely on from other countries to harvest much of the nation's food could no longer make the trip.

The concern is widespread. In Britain, farmers are struggling to find people to pick raspberries and potatoes. Part of Germany's prized white asparagus crop risks rotting in the ground. And in Italy, over a quarter of the strawberries, beans and lettuce ripening in coming months may

lack harvesters.

European governments have declared food supplies a matter of national security as millions flock to supermarkets to brace for prolonged home confinement. But border lockdowns have immobilized legions of seasonal workers from Eastern Europe who toil in fields from Spain to Sweden, forcing a rapid rethink of how to supply labor to those farms.

France's agriculture minister this week trumpeted what sounded like a surreal call for hairdressers, waiters, florists and others temporarily unable to work at their mothballed businesses to head to the nation's fields and start picking.

"I'm calling on this shadow

army, on the many men and women who want to work," Didier Guillaume, the minister, said on BFM television Tuesday. "We have to produce to feed the French."

Europe isn't about to run out of food. Truckloads of pasta, tomatoes and other goods continue to cross the continent, with bottlenecks at some borders. But the widening clarion call to citizens underscores an uncomfortable reality: Without low-cost mobile labor from Eastern Europe, the breadbaskets of Europe's wealthier economies risk losing their harvest.

Malte Voigts grows the creamy pale asparagus celebrated in Germany as "white gold" and harvested each spring



Romanian migrant workers, who arrived before the borders closed, on Malte Voigts' farm in Kremmen, northwest of Berlin. Gordon Welters/NYT

to much fanfare. But as the days grow warmer and stalks begin peeking from the mounds of earth on the farm he runs in Kremmen, 30 miles northwest of Berlin, he and neighboring farmers are struggling with limited numbers of seasonal workers and more stringent housing conditions to allow for social distancing.

Normally he relies on a workforce of about 170 mostly Romanian workers for the asparagus harvest. Right now, about half that number are on hand, most of them having arrived before Czech Republic and Hungary blocked travel through their countries.

Germany's agriculture sector relies on 300,000 seasonal

workers to plant and harvest produce throughout the spring and summer. Like many growers in Brandenburg state, where about 24,000 tons of asparagus is raised each year, Voigts said he would need more people for the high season, which starts in late April.

Hoping to fill the gaps, he put out a call for help on his company's website. "Hundreds of people have called in, even a mother, saying her two teens could help out — which we don't allow," he said. "I almost get goose bumps."

Thousands of Germans have also logged on to a national website offering to help farmers or nurseries needing workers. The jobs pay the German minimum

wage of 9.35 euros (about \$10.25) an hour — the same wage paid to foreign harvesters. But with only 16,000 applicants so far, the agriculture minister has urged the government to also grant refugees who have not qualified for a work permit the right to help in the fields.

Until this week, seasonal workers who could bypass travel restrictions and get to the German border would be allowed in. But on Wednesday farmers faced a further squeeze after the Interior ministry announced that Germany would ban all seasonal workers from entering the country, citing concerns by the public that they could bring the coronavirus with them. NYT