

British PM tests positive for coronavirus

U.S. overtakes China with the most number of infections; Spain toll hits 4,858 as 769 die in 24 hours

ASSOCIATED PRESS
LONDON

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said on Friday he has tested positive for the coronavirus, while the number of infections in the U.S. surged to the most in the world and Spain announced a record number of virus deaths overnight.

Mr. Johnson's office said the Prime Minister was tested after showing mild symptoms for the new 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," Mr. Johnson said in a video message, adding that he had a temperature and persistent cough.

Several weeks ago, Mr. Johnson had pledged he would "go on shaking hands with everybody".

Mr. Johnson, 55, was the first leader of a major nation known to have contracted COVID-19; German Chancellor Angela Merkel has been in isolation since her doctor tested positive for the virus,



Cause for concern: British Prime Minister Boris Johnson with Health Secretary Matt Hancock, in this file photo. Both of them have tested positive for COVID-19. • AFP

but her first two tests have been negative.

Earlier this week Britain's Prince Charles said he had tested positive.

British Health Secretary Matt Hancock, who has been at the forefront of nation's response to the outbreak, also was confirmed to have tested positive for the virus. Britain has 11,658 confirmed cases of the virus, and 578 people have died.

Spain's Health Ministry re-

COVID-19

ported another 7,800 infections overnight for a total of 64,059. Deaths climbed by 769 to 4,858 – the world's second highest total after Italy's 8,214 fatalities.

9,000 health workers
Spain says 9,444 health workers have contracted the coronavirus. That's nearly 15% of the total number of

cases. "It's true that we have more deaths than what we saw yesterday, but it's also true that the percentage increase today is similar to that of the past three days and it appears there is a stabilization," said Fernando Simón, the head of Spain's health emergency coordination centre.

In Washington, the House kicked off debate on a \$2.2 trillion package to ease the pandemic's devastating toll

on the U.S. economy and health care system.

The chamber had appeared set to pass the measure after an extraordinary 96-0 Senate passage, but the vote ran into complications. A Republican lawmaker threatened to delay passage until most lawmakers return to Washington, which could make a Friday vote impossible.

The situation in countries with more fragile health care systems worsened, with Russia, Indonesia and South Africa all passing the 1,000-infection mark. South Africa also announced its first two deaths as it began a three-week lockdown.

The U.S. now has 86,012 confirmed cases, and Italy was set to pass China's 81,897 infections later on Friday, according to a count kept by Johns Hopkins University. The three countries account nearly half the world's nearly 558,905 infections and more than half of the 25,336 reported virus deaths.

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

China and U.S. must 'unite to fight virus', Xi tells Trump

'Cooperation is mutually beneficial & the only right choice'

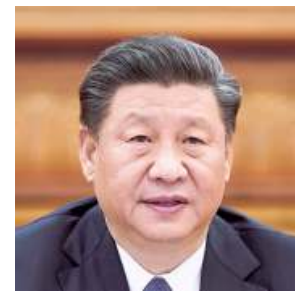
AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BEIJING

China and the U.S. 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 U.S. to improve relations.

The two countries have clashed in recent weeks over the virus, and Chinese state media said Mr. Xi told Mr. Trump he hoped the "U.S. will take substantive actions to improve Sino-U.S. 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 U.S.", according to state broadcaster CCTV.

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



Xi Jinping

"China has been through much & has developed a strong understanding of the virus. We are working closely together. Much respect," he wrote.

War of words
Mr. 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 first detected in the Chinese city of Wuhan.

Mr. Trump has since dropped the term amid ac-

cusations of racism, in another small sign of easing tensions between the two world powers.

Earlier this month, a Foreign Ministry spokesman in Beijing also suggested in a tweet that the U.S. military brought the virus to Wuhan.

This prompted Mr. Trump to accuse China of spreading misinformation, and the US President repeatedly attacked China's lack of transparency and the slowness of its initial response to the outbreak.

Mr. Xi said Sino-U.S. relations were at a "critical juncture", CCTV reported, adding that cooperation was mutually beneficial and "the only right choice".

During the call, Mr. Xi said China had shared information about the epidemic with the World Health Organization and other countries, including the U.S., in a "timely" manner throughout.

German researchers plan mass immunity study to track virus

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
FRANKFURT AM MAIN

German researchers plan to regularly test over 100,000 people to see if they have overcome infection with COVID-19 to track its spread, an institute behind the plan confirmed on Friday.

A spokeswoman for Brunswick's Helmholtz Institute for Infectious Disease Re-

search confirmed a report in news weekly *Der Spiegel* that large-scale testing for antibodies could start in April if researchers are given the green light.

"You could give immune people something similar to a vaccination certificate that could allow them exceptions from limits on their activities," Helmholtz Institute

epidemiologist Gerard Krause told *Der Spiegel*.

But even if the study is approved, initial readings might not be completely reliable. Tests currently available can show false positives for coronavirus antibodies, as 90% of adults already have immunity against common, harmless viruses from the same family.

Toll rises to 2,378 in Iran, infections cross 32,000

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
ASSOCIATED PRESS
TEHRAN

Iran on Friday announced 144 new deaths from the novel coronavirus, bringing the official number of fatalities to 2,378 in one of the world's worst-hit countries.

"In the past 24 hours, we've had 2,926 new confirmed cases across the country," Health Ministry

spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour said. More than 32,000 people have been infected in the country.

Meanwhile, nearly 300 people have been killed and more than 1,000 sickened so far by ingesting methanol over fears about the new coronavirus. Drinking alcohol is banned in the country and those who do rely on bootleggers.

ELSEWHERE



Prince Harry and Meghan set up base in California

LONDON
Prince Harry and wife Meghan have permanently relocated to California, media reports said. The couple flew by private jet from Canada to Los Angeles last week before the border between the two countries closed because of the deadly virus outbreak, *The Sun* reported. • AFP

Israel heads for unity government

TEL AVIV
Israel appeared headed for a unity government on Friday after Opposition leader Benny Gantz moved towards an agreement with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, disappointing voters who had hoped to bring down the right-wing premier. Mr. Gantz was elected parliamentary speaker on Thursday with support from Mr. Netanyahu's Likud and allied parties. REUTERS

U.S. officials push to evict 'Chinese spies'

Administration officials suspect several employees at media outlets in the U.S. are agents

EDWARD WONG
JULIAN E. BARNES
WASHINGTON

As China moves forward with expelling almost all American journalists from three major U.S. newspapers, Trump administration officials have intensified discussions over whether to evict employees of Chinese media outlets who they say mainly act as spies.

The action is under consideration because some U.S. officials want to retaliate against China in a new conflict that has revolved around news organisations and is being fuelled by hostility over the coronavirus pandemic.

Since the virus began spreading across the U.S., Washington and Beijing have waged a global information war over the outbreak. President Donald Trump and his aides are trying to pin responsibility on China, where Communist Party officials initially covered up the dan-



A file photo of a Foreign Ministry briefing in Beijing. China recently said it would expel U.S. journalists. • AP

gers of the virus as it was first discovered. Mr. Trump, though, has been criticised for vast failures in the U.S. response.

Strong case
Some U.S. intelligence officials have pushed for years to expel employees of Chinese media organisations who they say mainly file intelligence reports. The officials now see an opening to make a strong case after Beijing abruptly announced this

month that it would expel almost all U.S. citizens who report from mainland China for *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal*.

China also demanded those organisations, as well as Voice of America and *Time* magazine, turn over information on employees, budgets, assets and other operational details.

U.S. officials view the state-run outlets in China as a potent threat in the grow-

ing strategic rivalry between the two superpowers, both because the outlets disseminate propaganda around the world and because of their ability to provide cover for intelligence operatives.

"Propaganda outlets that report to the Chinese Communist Party are foreign agents, not 'journalists,'" the State Department spokeswoman, Morgan Ortogus, said on Twitter on Thursday.

Information duel

"Even General Secretary Xi says they 'must speak for the Party,'" she added, referring to remarks that President Xi Jinping of China made in 2016 as he toured the headquarters of state-run media organisations. In recent days, Ms. Ortogus and Hua Chunying, a spokeswoman for the Chinese Foreign Ministry, have engaged in an information duel on Twitter.

Any expulsion of Chinese employees at media outlets accused of conducting intel-

ligence work could include ones based at the United Nations, where China has a permanent seat on the Security Council, according to an intelligence official familiar with the plans.

Most Chinese employees of state-run organisations work in Washington for large organisations. Some Chinese intelligence operatives pose as journalists at those agencies and at smaller state-run outlets, using "nonofficial cover," in the parlance of spies, experts on Chinese espionage say.

Some U.S. officials have spoken of entirely shutting down those small outfits as well as any Chinese organisation or company accused of being a front for intelligence work.

Officials declined to estimate the number of Chinese intelligence operatives in the U.S. they say use journalism employment as a cover or the number they would like to expel. NY TIMES

Virus cases spike on U.S. aircraft carrier: media

'23 patients on USS Theodore Roosevelt'

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
WASHINGTON

The number of coronavirus cases on the *USS Theodore Roosevelt* aircraft carrier in the Pacific Ocean has spiked to at least 23, with authorities moving to isolate the entire crew in port, U.S. media reported.

Earlier this week, three sailors were evacuated after testing positive, the first cases reported on a U.S. Navy ship on deployment.

"Additional positive cases of COVID-19 have been discovered", Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Mike Gilday said in a statement on Thursday, without specifying how many.

He added he expected further positive tests among the more than 5,000 personnel on board the warship, which is in Guam on a "pre-scheduled port visit".

None was seriously ill and none had been hospitalised, Admiral Gilday said.



The USS Theodore Roosevelt • REUTERS

The *Wall Street Journal* said there were now "at least 23" cases and quoted Acting Navy Secretary Thomas Modly as saying authorities were "in the process now of testing 100% of the crew".

"During the port visit, base access will be limited to the pier for *Roosevelt's* sailors. No base or regional personnel will access the pier," Mr. Modly said.

The *USS Theodore Roosevelt* was last in port in Vietnam, but Admiral Gilday said it was difficult to connect the cases to a particular port visit.

Afghan government names team for talks with Taliban

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
KABUL

The Afghan government has finalised a 21-member team – including five women – who will negotiate with the Taliban in upcoming talks aimed at ending Afghanistan's 18-year-old conflict, officials said on Friday.

Under a deal signed by the U.S. and the Taliban last month, the insurgents agreed to commit to starting talks with the Afghan government and discuss a possible ceasefire. Up until now, the Taliban has refused to meet with the administration of President Ashraf Ghani, calling him an American stooge. In return for starting talks and other commitments, the U.S. and foreign

partner forces will withdraw from Afghanistan over the next 14 months.

Political crisis

The negotiating team was supposed to be unveiled weeks ago, with the "intra-Afghan" talks with the Taliban meant to get under way on March 10 in Oslo. But Kabul has been gripped by a political crisis, with Mr. Ghani's legitimacy being challenged by his rival Abdullah Abdullah, who has also proclaimed himself President.

The team will be led by former Afghan intelligence chief Masoom Stanekzai, who as a Pashtun shares a tribal identity with the Taliban. While there was no immediate indication of wheth-

er Mr. Abdullah supports the team's composition, it includes Batur Dostum whose father Abdul Rashid Dostum – a notorious former warlord – is a staunch Abdullah ally.

In a statement, Afghanistan's Peace Ministry said Mr. Ghani "wishes the delegation success".

Among the five women delegates is Habiba Sarabi, deputy leader of the government's High Peace Council. Sarabi is a Hazara, the predominantly Shi'ite ethnic group that the Taliban have repeatedly targeted.

Another woman delegate is Fawzia Koofi, an ethnic Tajik and a woman's rights activist who has been a vocal Taliban critic.

Sanders sees a moment that matches his ideas

Allies say he believes that he can meld the COVID-19 crisis with his progressive policy agenda

SYDNEY EMBER

Both hands were waving – over here, over there, a full wingspan on display – as Bernie Sanders directed his most biting sarcasm at his "Republican friends".

Excuse him, forgive him, for wanting working people to get a few more bucks for a few more months as part of the sweeping stimulus bill that was being debated on the Senate floor. Excuse him, forgive him, for wanting "to punish the poor and working people" struggling to weather the economic meltdown caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

"My Republican colleagues are very distressed," he said on Wednesday. "Oh

my God, the universe is collapsing!" he said so passionately that he nearly spat.

With the virus bringing the nation to a virtual stop, there is no real presidential campaign for Mr. Sanders to engage in, and even if there were, he is almost hopelessly behind Joe Biden in the delegate count. But Sanders is still running, in large part, allies and aides say, because he believes he can meld this moment of national crisis with the progressive policy agenda that has been his life's work.

"For someone who has built a career out of campaigning against the inequality of our health care system, this is prime time," said Nick Carter, who served as politi-



Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders

cal outreach director for the 2016 Sanders campaign.

So Mr. Sanders will take the stage when he can get it – including on the Senate floor on Wednesday night, but also in news releases, radio and television interviews

and live streams where he studiously repeats his mantra to loyalists.

It is unclear who exactly is listening or whether he can make a difference. Even Mr. Biden, as the likely Democratic nominee to face President Donald Trump, has struggled to get visibility. Both candidates are being overshadowed by daily briefings from Mr. Trump and Gov. Andrew Cuomo of New York.

Not going anywhere

In an interview on Thursday with the public radio programme "1A", Mr. Sanders did not say how long he intended to stay in the race but suggested he was not going anywhere soon.

And he rebuffed a comparison to his 2016 campaign, when he fought Hillary Clinton to the bitter end, arguing that the coronavirus made the two situations different because many states this year had postponed their primaries.

"You're talking about an election without elections," he said. "What does that mean? It's kind of unprecedented."

Some close to him suggested that his virus outreach was a way to keep his supporters motivated and engaged during this strange time of suspended animation, so that the campaign can jump-start them into action if he decides to rev his candidacy back up. NYTIMES