

# Virus infections top 600,000 globally

We cannot completely prevent spread at this stage, says Merkel; in Africa, curbs trigger violence

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
BERLIN

The number of confirmed coronavirus infections worldwide topped 600,000 on Saturday as new cases stacked up quickly in Europe and the U.S. and officials dug in for a long fight against the pandemic. The latest landmark came only two days after the world passed half a million infections, according to a tally by Johns Hopkins University, showing that much work remains to be done to slow the spread of the virus. It showed more than 6,21,000 cases and over 28,600 deaths.

COVID-19

While the U.S. now leads the world in reported infections – with more than 1,05,000 cases – five countries exceed its roughly 1,700 deaths – Italy, Spain, China, Iran and France.

“We cannot completely prevent infections at this stage, but we can and must in the immediate future achieve fewer new infections per day, a slower spread,” German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who is in quarantine at home after her doctor tested positive for the virus, told her compatriots in an audio message. “That will decide whether our health system can stand up to the virus.” The virus already has put health systems in Italy, Spain and France under extreme strain. Lockdowns of varying severity have been introduced across Europe, nearly emptying streets in cities, including Paris.

Ms. Merkel appealed to Germans to “be patient”. Her Chief of Staff said Germany – where authorities closed non-essential shops and banned gatherings of



Geared up: A health worker at a medical centre testing a patient in Paris on Friday. • AFP

more than two in public – won't relax its restrictions before April 20. The effects of the outbreak have been felt by the powerful and the poor alike. On Friday, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson became the first leader of a major country to test positive for the virus. He said he would continue to work from self-quarantine.

In Finland, police at roadblocks started restricting the movement of people into and out of its worst-hit Uusimaa region, which includes the capital, Helsinki.

## Violent turn

In parts of Africa, virus prevention measures took a violent turn as countries imposed lockdowns and curfews or sealed off major cities, with police in Kenya firing tear gas and officers elsewhere captured on video hitting people with batons.

New York remained the worst-hit U.S. city. Governor Andrew Cuomo said the struggle to defeat the virus will take “weeks and weeks and weeks”.

## Spain counts 832 deaths in 24 hours taking toll to 5,690

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
MADRID

The death toll from coronavirus in Spain surged over 5,600 on Saturday after a record 832 people died in 24 hours, and the number of infections soared over 72,000, the government said.

Spain has the world's second-highest coronavirus

death toll after Italy with 5,690 fatalities. Italy saw over 900 deaths on Friday. The number of confirmed cases have jumped to 72,248 as the country moves to significantly increase testing.

Although Spain's latest figures showed a daily increase of more than 8,000 cases, the rate of new infections appears to be slowing.

## Trump signs \$2 trillion recovery plan as cases soar

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
WASHINGTON

President Donald Trump signed into law on Friday the \$2 trillion rescue plan to salvage a U.S. economy crippled by the novel coronavirus, on a day the nation's total count of COVID-19 cases surpassed 1,00,000.

Mr. Trump's signature

triggers the distribution of millions of relief cheques of up to \$3,400 for an average American family of four. The U.S. has recorded 1,693 deaths from the virus so far.

“I want to thank Democrats and Republicans for coming together and putting America first,” Mr. Trump said.

## U.S. lab unveils 5-minute test

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
WASHINGTON

A U.S.-based lab has unveiled a portable test that can tell if someone has COVID-19 in as little as five minutes, it said in a statement on Friday.

Abbott Laboratories said the U.S. Food and Drug Administration had given it emergency authorisation to begin making the test available to healthcare providers as early as next week.

The test, which is the size of a small toaster and uses molecular technology, also shows negative results within 13 minutes, the company said in a release.

## Iran death toll crosses 2,500

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
TEHRAN

Iran announced on Saturday that 139 more people had died from the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), raising the official death toll to 2,517.

Health Ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour told a news conference that 3,076 more cases had been confirmed in the past 24 hours, bringing the total number of infections to 35,408.

“The condition of 3,026 of those hospitalised is critical in one way or another,” he said, adding that 11,679 patients have recovered and been discharged from hospital. Mr. Jahanpour said that 57 million Iranians had been screened for the virus.

# China's virus epicentre eases travel restrictions after lockdown

People stranded elsewhere are allowed to enter Wuhan

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
WUHAN

Trains packed with thousands of passengers arrived in Wuhan on Saturday as the Chinese city that was Ground Zero for the global coronavirus pandemic partly reopened after months in lockdown.

Returnees, some wearing two face masks, latex gloves and protective suits, were greeted at the railway station by staff in similar anti-virus gear – a grim reminder that while the city was emerging from isolation, it was still far from normal.

“As the train neared Wuhan, my child and I were both very excited,” a 36-year-old woman said. She and her daughter had been away from her husband for nearly 10 weeks. “It felt like the train was moving faster than before, and my daughter said the driver must know we really want to go home.”



Inching towards normalcy: People at a train station in Shanghai walking to a train that stops at Wuhan. • AFP

Wuhan, where the contagion was first detected late last year, was placed under lockdown in January.

**Outbreak under control**  
With the outbreak deemed under control, rules have been eased to allow people to enter the city and many trains had been fully booked days in advance.

Restrictions on residents heading out of Wuhan will

not be lifted until April 8 when the airport will also reopen for domestic flights.

Travellers were allowed to leave the train station on Saturday after showing a green code on a mobile app to prove they are healthy.

Those who had been overseas were herded to reception desks to be tested for the virus as China battles to control infections brought from abroad.

# Beijing sends medical aid to Pakistan to combat coronavirus outbreak

Plane with medical workers and aid reaches Islamabad

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
ISLAMABAD

China sent a plane loaded with medical personnel and supplies to help Pakistan fight the spread of the coronavirus in one of the world's most populous nations, the Pakistani Foreign Ministry said Saturday.

Across West Asia and elsewhere, the outbreak has raised concerns that health systems strapped by multiple wars, refugee crises and unstable economies won't

be able to handle a growing numbers in cases. Iran is battling the worst outbreak in the region.

**Qureishi greets doctors**  
The plane carrying aid to Pakistan was met at the capital's airport on Saturday by Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureishi, who greeted the arriving Chinese doctors and officials.

On Friday, China sent ventilators, masks and other medical equipment to the

South Asian country, and a previous shipment of masks was sent. Pakistan is a key link in China's ambitious multibillion-dollar ‘One Road Project’ linking south and Central Asia with China.

Pakistan, with a population of 220 million, currently has 1,408 confirmed cases of the virus, including 11 deaths from the illness it causes, COVID-19. Most of the infected people there were travellers returning from neighbouring Iran.

# Taiwan Foreign Minister invites U.S. scribes expelled by China

Beijing had revoked their accreditations earlier in March

REUTERS  
TAIPEI

Taiwan Foreign Minister Joseph Wu extended a personal invitation on Saturday for three major U.S. newspapers to station on the island their China-based journalists whose expulsion Beijing has announced.

China said on March 18 it was revoking the press accreditations of all American journalists in the China bureaus of *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal* and *Washington Post*, which were due to expire at the end of 2020. Beijing also said those affected would not be allowed to work as journalists in the Chinese-run city of Hong Kong. In the past, foreign journalists kicked out of, or barred from, mainland China were allowed to work in Hong



Taiwan Foreign Minister Joseph Wu

Kong. “As @nytimes, @WSJ & @washingtonpost face intensifying hostility in China, I'd like to welcome you to be stationed in Taiwan – a country that is a beacon of freedom & democracy,” Mr. Wu wrote on Twitter. “Yes! You'll find people here greeting you with open arms & lots of genuine smiles.”

Taiwan is home to only a small number of permanent

foreign correspondents, and none of the three newspapers has a full-time presence on the island currently.

While Chinese-claimed Taiwan is a free-wheeling democracy with freedom of expression, it has stepped up controls to help prevent the spread of the virus, and generally only foreigners holding residence permits are currently allowed entry.

China has laid the blame for the situation with the three newspapers at Washington's door, for first restricting the number of Chinese media in the U.S. Last month, Washington demanded journalists from Chinese state media be registered as staff of diplomatic missions, saying it was a response to the growing crackdown on independent reporting in China.

# Civil rights icon Joseph Lowery passes away

He campaigned closely alongside Martin Luther King for racial equality

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
WASHINGTON

U.S. civil rights leader Reverend Joseph Lowery, who campaigned with Martin Luther King, died on Friday aged 98. “Our beloved, Rev. Dr. Joseph Echols Lowery, made his transition peacefully at home” surrounded by his daughters, the Joseph & Evelyn Lowery Institute said, adding “his legacy of service and struggle was long and rich.”

Born in Huntsville, Alabama in 1921, Rev. Lowery worked closely alongside leading figures in the civil rights movement and with King co-founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) civil rights group in 1957.

## Medal of Freedom award

He was chosen to speak at the inauguration of the U.S.'s first black President Barack Obama in 2009, and later that year was awarded the



Rev. Joseph Lowery, centre, with Barack Obama, then a presidential hopeful, in Selma, Alabama, in 2007. • REUTERS

Medal of Freedom, the country's highest civilian award.

“By being born black, I can't ever remember not being in the movement,” Rev. Lowery told *The Journal-Constitution* in a 2001 interview. He recalled one day in 1933 that almost set him on a very different path to the civic action, protest marches and impassioned oratory that made his name. As he

was leaving his father's candy store in Huntsville, the 11-year-old Lowery almost collided with a white police officer entering the shop. “Don't you see a white man coming in?” he recalled the officer saying, after referring to the boy using a racial epithet and hitting him in the stomach with his stick.

Incensed, Rev. Lowery went home to fetch his father's gun. But his father was in the house too, and, after taking the weapon away, gave his son a long lecture.

After decades campaigning against racial discrimination during which he was arrested several times, Rev. Lowery was dubbed “the Dean” of the civil rights movement by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

In 2006, he was one of many figures to criticise President George W. Bush at the funeral for civil rights “first lady” Coretta Scott King over the Iraq war, a domestic eavesdropping programme and the government's response to Hurricane Katrina.

Speaking in verse, Rev. Lowery said no weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq but that there were “weapons of misdirection” employed in the U.S. “For war billions more, but no more for the poor,” he said to cheers and applause.

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## ELSEWHERE



## Military reaffirms support for Maduro

CARACAS  
Venezuela's armed forces chief Admiral Remigio Ceballos reaffirmed their support on Friday for President Nicolas Maduro a day after the U.S. Justice Department charged him with “narco-terrorism” and offered a \$15 million reward for his capture. • AFP

## Taliban not to negotiate with Afghan team

KABUL  
The Taliban refused to negotiate with the team announced by the Afghan government, in a potential setback to the peace process. Spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said the group would not negotiate with the team as it was not selected in a way that included “all Afghan factions”. • REUTERS

# Russia to close borders

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
MOSCOW

Russia is to completely close its borders from Monday to stop the spread of the virus, the government said on Saturday.

A decree on the government's website said Russia would “temporarily restrict traffic” across national borders to prevent new infections.

The country closed its borders to foreigners last week and grounded all international flights on Thursday as part of increasingly stringent measures to slow the spread of COVID-19 in Russia. Health officials have registered 1,264 cases and four deaths, according to Saturday's official tally.

Russian diplomats and truck drivers will be exempted from the new restrictions.

# ‘Countries reporting less than 20% of symptomatic cases’

U.K. epidemiologist Adam Kucharski says a big challenge in fighting COVID-19 is that a lot of transmission happens very early on in the infection

NARAYAN LAKSHMAN

Professor Adam Kucharski, who is an Associate Professor and the Sir Henry Dale Fellow at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, specialises in the mathematical analysis of infectious disease outbreaks. He spoke to *The Hindu* about the global coronavirus pandemic, specifically on what nations can learn from models of infectious outbreaks, and even of fake news. Edited excerpts:

In your book, *The Rules of Contagion: Why Things Spread - and Why They Stop*, you talk about Ronald Ross, a Nobel Prize-winning British doctor who in the late 19th century discovered that mosquitoes spread malaria. How can we apply the blend of

mathematics, biology and societal analysis that he did to predict the endgame scenario for the coronavirus pandemic today?

One of the key insights that Ross made was regarding the control of infection. People had this idea that you couldn't control malaria until you could remove every single last mosquito. Ross used these simple, conceptual models and realised that actually you don't need to remove every last mosquito. Once you get the density of mosquitos low enough, the chances are that someone who is infected would recover before they pass it on to others.

We can think of a similar idea with a lot of the physical distancing measures that are coming in. Initially, there



Adam Kucharski. • NYT

may still be some infectious people out there, but because these measures are in place, they will have the infection and recover before they pass it on to someone else. That's what we've seen in places like Wuhan.

How, in terms of the mathematics of epidemiology, does

COVID-19 differ from other major infectious outbreaks such as the Spanish flu, SARS or Ebola?

There are a number of broad principles that we can use to understand these infections. These can apply across a number of pathogens, particularly in understanding the magnitude of spread. So, each person who gets infected, on average, how many people are they giving the virus to? For COVID-19, it is about two or three. We can also think about the time scales: if you have one case, how long on average is it until the person infected then shows symptoms? For COVID-19, that's about five days or so.

One of the big challenges or differences of COVID-19, as opposed to SARS or Ebola,

is that a lot of transmission seems to be happening very early on in the infection, when people don't have symptoms or have very mild symptoms. One of the reasons why infections like Ebola and SARS have been easier to control is that a lot of people who are highly infectious have very distinctive symptoms.

That means you can identify them, look at whom they've come in contact with, and make sure those people have been quarantined. However, for COVID-19, a lot of the transmission happens among people who might feel perfectly well, or might have a slight cough, for example. That makes it very hard to pick up all the infections.

India has a relatively low

number of confirmed cases and correspondingly fewer recorded deaths linked to COVID-19. Given the size and density of our population, does this seem a little suspicious to you?

I think in the early stages, it is quite hard to untangle those two things, when you have a very small number of cases – is it just by chance, or population structure or other features that mean that transmission hasn't quite taken off yet?

Once we start to get more severe cases, especially deaths, you can then start to get a clearer picture of how much infection you might be seeing. We recently did some rough estimates and we think that many countries that have clear outbreaks now are probably reporting

less than 20% of their symptomatic cases.

Do you see any parallels between deadly pandemics such as COVID-19 and how fake news transmission happens?

There certainly are parallels. For COVID-19, on average, in the early stage, each case would give the infection to a couple of others. In a study of viral Facebook content, it was found that each person on average who shares a viral post will lead to about two more people sharing it. But the big difference is the time scale.

With COVID-19, it takes a few days for that transmission and that new infection to occur whereas online we might be talking about 30 seconds.