

Spain reports record daily toll of 838

Number of deaths rise for third consecutive day; in the U.S., Trump rules out lockdown in New York

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
MADRID

Spain reported a national daily record of 838 COVID-19 deaths on Sunday in a fresh warning to the world that long-term lockdowns may be needed to halt the deadly march of a disease that has claimed more than 31,000 lives. A deluge of patients are overwhelming hospitals in Europe and the United States, now the focal points of a pandemic that is upending the global economy in unprecedented ways.

COVID-19

In the U.S., an about-face by President Donald Trump on quarantining New York highlighted the panic and confusion unfurling across many parts of the world trying to contain the virus. In Spain, where the 24-hour death toll rose for the third consecutive day, lockdown measures have been tightened as officials cling to hope that slowing growth rates mean they are nearing the peak of the crisis.

Shortage of medical gear
COVID-19's relentless spread has infected nearly every sphere of life, from wiping out millions of jobs to postponing elections and putting a pause on the world's sporting scene. It has also spurred a worldwide scramble for medical gear as exhausted doctors and nurses in some of the world's wealthiest cities struggle to dole out limited stocks of face masks and life-saving respirators.

In Britain, deaths have now topped 1,000 as Prime Minister Boris Johnson — who tested positive for the virus last week — warned that dark days were on the horizon. “We know things



French nurses taking care of four patients infected with COVID-19 in a train at Nancy station. The patients were being transferred to the western part of France. ■ AFP

will get worse before they get better,” Mr. Johnson, who said he has only mild symptoms, wrote in a leaflet sent to all U.K. households.

With the pandemic sweeping westward, the U.S. is home to the highest number of confirmed infections globally with more than 1,24,000 cases, according to a Johns Hopkins University tally. As States impose a patchwork of measures, President Trump sowed confusion over the weekend by back-peddling on a proposal to impose a broad lockdown on New York and its neighbours. “A quarantine will not be necessary,” Mr. Trump tweeted eight hours after he stunned the New York metropolitan region — the epicentre of the U.S. outbreak — with a proposal to place it under quarantine. Around the world, more than 6,67,090 cases have been officially declared since the outbreak began late last year, according to an AFP tally.

‘Outbreak could claim up to 2,00,000 U.S. lives’

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
WASHINGTON

A senior U.S. scientist issued a cautious prediction on Sunday that COVID-19 could claim 1,00,000 to 2,00,000 lives in the United States. Dr. Anthony Fauci, who leads research into infectious diseases at the National Institutes of Health, told CNN that models predicting a million or more deaths were “almost certainly off the chart.”

“It’s not impossible, but very, very unlikely,” he offered a rough estimate of 1,00,000 to 2,00,000 deaths and “millions of cases.”

But Dr. Fauci, a leading member of President Donald Trump’s COVID-19 task force, quickly added, “I

don’t want to be held to that... It’s such a moving target that you can so easily be wrong and mislead people.”

Asked about the persistent shortage of tests for the COVID-19 disease, he struck a slightly more optimistic tone, saying, “If you compare a couple of weeks ago to where we are right now, we have an amazingly larger number of tests than we had.”

Asked how soon the wider availability of testing might allow a lifting of travel and work restrictions, Dr. Fauci said, “It’s going to be a matter of weeks. It’s not going to be tomorrow and it’s certainly not going to be next week. It’s going to be a little bit more than that.”

France carries out evacuation

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
NANCY

France evacuated 36 more COVID-19 patients from the hard-hit east to western areas on Sunday, hoping to free up intensive care units as hospitals brace for even more serious cases in the coming days. Two high-speed trains carried patients from Mulhouse and Nancy toward hospitals along France’s western coast, where the outbreak has been limited so far. France has already evacuated dozens over the past week from the east, hoping to stay ahead of a crisis that Prime Minister Edouard Philippe warned would only worsen over the next two weeks.

South Africans exit quarantine

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
JOHANNESBURG

President Cyril Ramaphosa on Sunday oversaw the release of dozens of South Africans who had been in quarantine since returning from Wuhan in China earlier this month. Mr. Ramaphosa went to a remote resort in the northern Limpopo province to free the 114 South Africans who had been isolated since March 14 when they were evacuated from China. The group, who had been working and studying in Wuhan, were all free of the virus on their return, but still quarantined.

Beijing sees rise in imported cases as normalcy returns to Wuhan

Many of them involve Chinese returning from other nations

REUTERS
WUHAN

A growing number of imported COVID-19 cases in China, where the epidemic originated in December, risked fanning a second wave of infections when domestic transmissions had “basically been stopped”, a senior health official said on Sunday.

China, where the disease first emerged in the central city of Wuhan, had an accumulated total of 693 cases entering from overseas, which meant “the possibility of a new round of infections remains relatively big”, Mi Feng, spokesman for the National Health Commission (NHC), said.

Nearly a quarter of those came from arrivals in Beijing. “Beijing, the capital, still bears the brunt of the risks,” said Xu Hejian, spokesman for the Beijing government, told reporters.

“There’s no reason to lay back and relax yet. It’s not a time when we can say everything is going well.” Most of those imported cases have involved Chinese returning home from abroad.

A total of 3,300 people have now died in mainland China, with a reported 81,439 infections.

China was widely accused of a delayed response when suspected cases first emerged in December. But the world’s most populous country has since won praise from the World Health Organization for its efforts to lock down affected areas and isolate patients.

313 imported cases

In the last seven days, China has reported 313 imported cases of COVID-19 but only six confirmed cases of dom-



A medical worker taking a swab sample from a person tested for the virus on Sunday. ■ AFP

estic transmission, NHC’s data showed.

There were 45 new cases reported in the mainland on Saturday, down from 54 on the previous day, with all but one involving travellers from overseas.

Airlines have been ordered to sharply cut international flights from Sunday. And restrictions on foreigners entering the country went into effect on Saturday.

No new cases in Hubei

Five more people died on Saturday, all of them in Wuhan, the capital of Hubei province. It has reported only one new case in the last 10 days. Saturday marked the fourth consecutive day that Hubei recorded no new confirmed cases.

The sole case of domestically transmitted virus was recorded in Henan province, bordering Hubei.

With traffic restrictions in the province lifted, Wuhan is also gradually reopening borders and restarting some local transportation services. All airports in Hubei resumed some domestic flights

on Sunday, with the exception of Wuhan, which will open to domestic flights on April 8. Flights from Hubei to Beijing remain suspended.

A train arrived in Wuhan on Saturday for the first time since the city was placed in lockdown two months ago.

Restrictions have also been eased on people looking to return to the capital, although the procedure still appears much more vigorous as it’s done on an application approval basis.

7,000 return to Beijing

More than 7,000 have returned to Beijing from Hubei by chartered trains or private cars, Mao Jun, a Beijing government official, said on Sunday.

On a cold and rainy Sunday, Wuhan streets and metro trains were still largely empty. The Hubei government said in its official WeChat account that a number of malls in Wuhan, as well as the Chu River and Han Street shopping belt, would be allowed to resume operations on Monday.

Malians vote amid virus, security fears

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BAMAKO

Malians voted in a long-delayed parliamentary election on Sunday, barely a day after the country recorded its first COVID-19 death and with the leading Opposition figure kidnapped and believed to be in the hands of jihadists.

There were security fears about the vote to elect new MPs to the 147-seat National Assembly even before the war-torn West African country recorded its first virus infection on Wednesday.

But then late on Saturday, just hours before polls opened at 0800 GMT Sunday, the country’s first COVID-19 death was announced — a 71-year-old man recently returned from France.

A new wave of the fake news pandemic is born

Misinformation linked to supposed cures and misleading claims has proliferated on social media

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
NEW YORK

The biggest reputational risk Facebook and other social media companies had expected in 2020 was fake news surrounding the U.S. presidential election. Be it foreign or domestic in origin, the misinformation threat seemed familiar, perhaps even manageable.

The novel coronavirus, however, has opened up an entirely different problem: the life-endangering consequences of supposed cures, misleading claims, snake-oil sales pitches and conspiracy theories about the outbreak.

So far, AFP has debunked almost 200 rumours and myths about the virus, but experts say stronger action from tech companies is needed to stop misinformation and the scale at which it can be spread online.



“There’s still a disconnect between what people think is true and what people are willing to share,” Professor David Rand, a specialist in brain and cognitive sciences at the MIT Sloan School of Management, said, explaining how a user’s bias toward content he or she thinks will be liked or shared typically dominates decision-making

when online. Part of the reason is that social media algorithms are geared to appeal to someone’s habits and interests: the emphasis is on likeability, not accuracy.

Changing that would require Facebook, Twitter and other such companies to alter what people see on screen. Prompts urging users to consider the accuracy

of content they are spreading on social networks are needed, said Mr. Rand, co-author of a study on COVID-19 misinformation that was published earlier this month.

‘Remedy’ kills 300

What is undoubted is that misinformation about the pandemic has been deadly. Although U.S., French and other scientists are working to expedite effective treatments, false reports have appeared in numerous countries. In Iran, a fake remedy of ingesting methanol has reportedly led to 300 deaths, and left many more sick.

Dr. Jason McKnight, assistant clinical professor in the Department of Primary Care and Population Health at Texas A&M University, said the sharing of false information has an impact beyond

the immediate risk of the virus itself. “I have seen posts related to ‘treatments’ that are not proven, techniques to prevent exposure and infection that are either not proven and/or filled with a lot of misleading information, and instruction for individuals to stock up on supplies and food,” he said.

Dr. McKnight highlighted two types of danger posed by inaccurate information on the virus: that it “could incite fear or panic,” and “the potential for individuals to do harmful things in hope of ‘curing the illness’ or ‘preventing the illness.’”

The COVID-19 misinformation study mirrored past tests for political fake news, notably in that reminders about accuracy would be a simple way to improve choices about what people share.

‘Worried’ German State Finance Minister kills self

He was tense about COVID-19 fallout

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BERLIN

Thomas Schaefer, the Finance Minister of Germany’s Hesse State, has committed suicide apparently after becoming “deeply worried” over how to cope with the economic fallout from the virus, State Premier Volker Bouffier said on Sunday. Mr. Schaefer, 54, was found dead near a railway track on Saturday. The Wiesbaden prosecution’s office said they believe he died by suicide. “We are in shock, we are in disbelief and above all we are immensely sad,” Mr. Bouffier said in a recorded statement.

Hesse is home to Germany’s financial capital Frankfurt, where major lenders like Deutsche Bank and Commerzbank have their

headquarters. The European Central Bank is also located in Frankfurt.

A visibly shaken Mr. Bouffier recalled that Mr. Schaefer, who was Hesse’s finance chief for 10 years, had been working “day and night” to help companies and workers deal with the economic impact of the pandemic. “Today we have to assume that he was deeply worried,” said Mr. Bouffier, a close ally of Chancellor Angela Merkel. “It’s precisely during this difficult time that we would have needed someone like him.” Popular and well-respected, Mr. Schaefer had long been touted as a possible successor to Mr. Bouffier. Like Mr. Bouffier, Mr. Schaefer belonged to Ms. Merkel’s centre-right CDU party.

Saudi Arabia intercepts missiles in attack claimed by Yemen’s Houthis

Shrapnel fall on capital Riyadh, border city of Jazan

REUTERS
RIYADH

Saudi Arabia said its air defences intercepted two ballistic missiles on Saturday night in an attack that Yemen’s Iran-aligned Houthi group on Sunday said it had launched towards the capital Riyadh and southern areas near the Yemeni border.

The attacks come days after Yemen’s warring parties had welcomed a UN call for an immediate truce on Thursday to fight the COVID-19 outbreak. “Two civilians were slightly injured due to the falling of the intercepted missile’s debris as it exploded in mid-air over residential districts,” in Riyadh, the Saudi state news agency (SPA) reported, citing a Saudi civil defence spokesman, Lt. Colonel Mohammed al-Hammadi.



A Patriot missile battery at al-Kharj, Saudi Arabia. ■ AFP

No fatalities were recorded from the shrapnel that fell on Riyadh, and the southwestern city of Jazan, located on the Red Sea directly north of the border with Yemen, SPA said, citing a spokesman for the Saudi-led coalition fighting Houthi in Yemen, Colonel Turki al-Malki.

Yemen’s Houthis battling the Saudi-led coalition have launched hundreds of missiles and drones across the border, mostly at nearby military and civilian targets but also at Riyadh.

The last attempted strike on the capital was in June 2018.

Saudi Arabia blamed Iran for a September 2019 drone and missile attack on two oil installations that initially halved Saudi oil output, even after the Houthis claimed responsibility. Tehran denies involvement.

A military spokesman for Yemen’s Houthis on Sunday said the group’s forces had launched rockets and drones at “sensitive” sites in the Saudi capital Riyadh and at economic and military sites in Jazan, Najran and Asir, near the Yemeni border.

N. Korea fires 2 short-range missiles

Pyongyang has launched nine projectiles in four rounds this month

REUTERS
SEOUL

North Korea fired what appeared to be two short-range ballistic missiles into the ocean off its east coast on Sunday, the latest in a flurry of launches that South Korea decried as “inappropriate” amid the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Two “short-range projectiles” were launched from the coastal Wonsan area, and flew 230 km at a maximum altitude of 30 km, South Korea’s Joint Chiefs of Staff reported. “In a situation where the entire world is experiencing difficulties due to COVID-19, this kind of military act by North Korea is very inappropriate and we call for an immediate halt,” South Korea’s JCS said in a statement, according to Yonhap news agency.

Japan’s Ministry of Defense said they appeared to be ballistic missiles, and they did not land in Japanese ter-



North Korean leader Kim Jong-un inspecting a military drill at an undisclosed location earlier this month. ■ AP

ritory or its exclusive economic zone. They would be the eighth and ninth missiles launched in four rounds of tests this month as North Korean troops conduct military drills, usually personally overseen by Kim Jong-un.

Unprecedented number
That would be the most missiles ever fired in a single month by North Korea, ac-

short-range weapons, such as the KN-24 fired during the last launch on March 21.

‘Strategic weapon’

But Mr. Kim has warned that North Korea is developing a new “strategic weapon” to be unveiled this year, with analysts speculating that it could be a new long-range ballistic missile, or a submarine capable of launching such missiles.

This month’s military drills have been conducted despite a border lockdown and quarantine measures imposed in North Korea in an effort to prevent an outbreak of COVID-19.

In the past, North Korea has typically conducted military drills, including tests of its ballistic missiles, in March as the wintry weather turns warmer. For the previous two years, however, it had avoided such springtime launches amid denuclearisation talks with the U.S.

ELSEWHERE



Rouhani warns Iran on prolonged restrictions

President Hassan Rouhani warned on Sunday that “the new way of life” in Iran was likely to be prolonged, as its declared death toll from COVID-19 rose to 2,640. “We must prepare to live with this virus until a treatment or vaccine is discovered, which has not yet happened to date,” he said. ■ AFP

Trudeau’s wife recovers from COVID-19

Montreal Sophie Gregoire-Trudeau, the wife of Canada’s Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, has recovered from COVID-19, she said on Saturday. She had tested positive for the virus on March 12 after returning from Britain, with her husband subsequently going into self-quarantine as a precautionary measure. ■ AFP