

U.S. virus crisis will get worse: Trump

Restrictions extended until April 30; Moscow imposes lockdown as situation in Europe remains grim

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
WASHINGTON

President Donald Trump has extended emergency coronavirus restrictions for the U.S., where his top scientist warned up to 2,00,000 people could die, as the Russian capital and Africa's biggest city readied to go into lockdown on Monday.

The reassessment by Mr. Trump, who had previously said he wanted the country back to work in mid-April, came as Britain and hard-hit Italy warned measures to prevent the spread of the disease would be in place for months to come. COVID-19 has already killed more than 33,000 people worldwide, with the number of cases nearing 7,00,000.



Working from prison: Minors serving prison sentences sewing masks at a juvenile centre in Guatemala City earlier this month. • AFP

COVID-19

As of Sunday, more than 3.38 billion people were asked or ordered to follow confinement measures, according to an AFP database, as the virus infects every sphere of life – wiping out millions of jobs, postponing elections and clearing the sporting calendar.

Mr. Trump warned that the crisis, which has seen a doubling of infections in two days, would continue to get worse. “The modelling estimates that the peak in death rate is likely to hit in two weeks,” he said, announcing an extension of social distancing guidelines until April 30. “Nothing would be worse than declaring victory before the victory is won.”

More deaths

The President was speaking after Anthony Fauci, who leads research into infectious diseases at the National Institutes of Health, said he believed 1,00,000 to

2,00,000 Americans could die from the disease, and millions could be infected.

Mr. Trump's re-evaluation of a back-to-normal timeline came as Europe's situation continued to worsen. British officials said life may not return to usual for six months.

In Italy, which has logged a third of global deaths, the government warned citizens should be ready for a lengthy lockdown that would only be lifted gradually. “We are in a very long battle,” said government medical adviser Luca Richeldi.

Moscow became the latest European city to tell people to stay indoors. Citizens will only be allowed to leave their homes in a medical emergency, to travel to jobs judged essential by the authorities, and to shop for food or medicines.

Africa's biggest city, Lagos, was due to join the global stay-at-home from Monday, with Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari ordering a two-week lockdown for its 20 million people.

Spain overtakes China in number of infections

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
MADRID

Spain confirmed another 812 deaths in 24 hours from COVID-19 on Monday, a slight decline on the previous day's toll, bringing the total number of deaths to 7,340.

The country, which has the world's second most deadly outbreak after Italy, recorded 838 deaths from the pandemic on Sunday, its third straight daily record for virus deaths. The percentage increase in the number of deaths on Monday over the previous day was 12.4%, less than half the increase of 27% recorded on Wednesday.

The growth in the number of new confirmed cases also slowed, posting a one-day rise of 8% to 85,195, according to the Health Ministry, compared

to a 20% rise on Wednesday. However, Spain has now joined the U.S. and Italy in having more cases than China, where the virus first appeared in December and which had confirmed 81,439 cases as of Sunday evening. Spain's healthcare system is struggling to cope with the surge of seriously ill patients all at once, with hotels and conference centres being used as temporary clinics and Madrid's largest ice rink turned into a provisional morgue.

The outbreak is also taking its toll on healthcare personnel, who complain of a lack of masks and other protective material.

As of Monday, over 12,200 medical staff were infected, up from around 9,500 on Friday, according to the Health Ministry.

FB offers grant to news media

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
WASHINGTON

Facebook said on Monday that it was donating \$100 million to support news organisations globally hurtling from the COVID-19 pandemic, citing the need for reliable information about the crisis.

The new funding includes \$25 million in emergency grants for local news through the Facebook Journalism Project, and \$75 million for additional marketing efforts “to move money over to news organizations around the world,” according to a statement.

Facebook said it will offer grants “to publishers most in need in the hardest hit countries.”

Jair Bolsonaro's tweets removed

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
SAO PAULO

Two tweets by Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro in which he questioned quarantine measures aimed at containing the virus were removed on Sunday, on the grounds that they violated the social network's rules.

Mr. Bolsonaro had posted videos in which he flouted his government's social distancing guidelines by mixing with supporters on the streets of Brasilia and urging them to keep the economy going. Two of the posts were removed and replaced with a notice explaining why they had been taken down.

‘Testing and mass quarantines helped Wuhan defeat virus’

Doctor from the city explains how China battled COVID-19

ANANTH KRISHNAN



Dr. Gong Zuojiang. •SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Wuhan, the epicentre of the COVID-19 outbreak, is slowly rebounding after two months in lockdown. Dr. Gong Zuojiang, Director of the Department of Infectious Diseases at Renmin Hospital of Wuhan University, has been on the frontlines of the COVID-19 fight in the city. In an interview with *The Hindu*, he says a key lesson from Wuhan's battle was breaking the chain of transmission through widespread testing and isolating all patients, even those with mild symptoms, away from their homes in central quarantine. Edited excerpts:

What is the present situation in terms of new infections and the current patients you are treating?

■ At present, COVID-19 has been brought under control through two months of prevention and management in Wuhan and Hubei province. No new patient has been diagnosed right now. However, we are still continuing strict monitoring.

What was your experience during the peak of the crisis?

■ At the beginning, there were too many patients that needed to be confirmed. The hospital did not have so many beds for the patients' hospitalisation. We had a shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE). Our hospital dedicated a separate campus, our east campus, as a designated hospital to receive severe and critical patients.

When was the ‘turning point’ achieved?

■ We reached the ‘turning point’ at the end of February, when the numbers of new confirmed and suspected cases dramatically decreased. Now, we are reporting zero cases.

Besides lockdown, what do you see as the most important measures in tackling the spread?

■ For prevention and control of a high contagion, the important measures are to manage and control those infected, and break down the transmission. For those cases that were mild and moderate, we found that transferring them to the ark hospital [makeshift hospitals of which 16 were built] is a good method that we would recommend. Also, avoid people gathering. Wearing masks and hand hygiene are also important. In addition, doctors should pay more attention for finding severe cases early in order to diagnose and treat critical cases to reduce the risk of mortality.

Can you explain why centralised quarantine and isolation was followed on such a large scale, as opposed to just home

isolation for mild cases?

■ Quarantine and home isolation depends on different countries' conditions. In China and India, because we have such a large population, one family may have several members. Cross-infection occurs commonly. For mild and moderate type confirmed cases, the ark hospital is a good quarantine and isolation place, and this helps avoid cross-infection and breaks down the transmission.

What was the scale of testing done in Wuhan?

■ I don't know exactly the scale of testing in the whole of Wuhan city. By the middle of January, when PCR reagents (nucleic acid testing) became available, our hospital alone tested around 1,000 samples daily. Right now, all samples can be examined because the supply of testing materials is enough. Testing for COVID-19 plays an important, even central role, because we want to find new cases and suspected cases as quickly as possible. Only then we can isolate patients and break down the transmission.

In a large population with limited resources, do you see alternatives to widespread testing?

■ For testing, scientists have different techniques. For example, antibodies detection and different (modified PCR) methods for nucleic acid detection could also be used. And an experienced radiologist could diagnose the suspected cases based on the CT scans.

Trump, Putin discuss oil prices, virus

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
MOSCOW

Russian President Vladimir Putin on Monday discussed closer cooperation on COVID-19 with U.S. President Donald Trump, with the two agreeing on “consultations” about oil prices, the Kremlin said. They “discussed closer cooperation between the two countries” on the COVID-19 response, the Kremlin said, without giving details.

Mr. Trump and Mr. Putin also “exchanged opinions on the current state of the global oil market. They arranged for Russia-U.S. consultations on this subject”.

The oil prices crashed earlier this month after a collapse of talks between Saudi-led OPEC and Moscow, unleashing a price war. Mr. Trump earlier said he was also expecting Mr. Putin to request the lifting of U.S. sanctions.

Opposition urges Sri Lankan govt. to reconvene Parliament

‘President can't approve funds to fight COVID-19 after April 30’

MEERA SRINIVASAN
COLOMBO

Nearly a month after President Gotabaya Rajapaksa dissolved Parliament and called for elections, the Opposition's calls for reconvening the legislature have grown louder in Sri Lanka.

A day after the Parliament completed 4.5 years of its term – constitutionally mandated for dissolution – President Rajapaksa dissolved the 225-member legislature and called snap general elections for April 25. However, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has also affected the island nation, the Election Commission postponed the polls indefinitely.

Health authorities on Monday confirmed the country's second COVID-19 death, of its 122 confirmed cases. Fourteen persons have recovered, according to the Health Promotion Bu-

reau. Sri Lanka has been on curfew for over a week, as authorities try to contain the spread of the deadly virus.

However, several former MPs from Sri Lanka's political opposition have urged the government to reconvene Parliament.

Former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe has noted that the President cannot approve any expenses towards COVID-19 after April 30. “Funds have been allocated for the government through the Vote on Account until the 30th of April. From that day onwards until the new Parliament is convened again, the President does not have powers to approve additional expenses. We cannot predict as to when the new Parliament would be convened. This is a crisis,” he said in a recent statement.

Sri Lanka Muslim Con-

gress Leader Rauff Hakeem had made the point at the all-party leaders' meeting convened by Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa on March 24. “I had to point out the need to re-summon Parliament to show the nation that we are united in this hour of national emergency,” Mr. Hakeem said.

Former Finance Minister Mangala Samaraweera pointed to Section 70 (7) of the Constitution, which empowers the President to convene Parliament in an emergency and said it existed “precisely for such an eventuality.”

However, government spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella said the necessity to reconvene Parliament “hasn't arisen yet.” “Whether there is parliament or not, everything is moving...things can't be smoother,” he told *The Hindu*.

COVID-19: Maldives Parliament meets online, discusses strategies

Govt. to support sectors like fishing that can ‘bounce back’

MEERA SRINIVASAN
COLOMBO

Determined to keep Parliament functional during the COVID-19 outbreak, Maldivian legislators on Monday convened online for a crucial session to discuss strategies to combat the pandemic.

As many as 71 of the 87-member House logged in on Monday using a web conferencing facility, appreciating the need for physical distancing. “Even though we are confined to our homes, our democracy is not under house arrest. The work of the Flag of Maldives People's Majlis continues unimpeded, online,” Speaker and former President Mohamed Nasheed said in a tweet.

To help members get used to the software and iron out any technical issues, “a rehearsal of the online Parliament” was held on



Mohamed Nasheed

Saturday, according to officials in Male.

A notice on the session of Parliament – or People's Majlis – with the agenda was sent to the MPs via text message in advance.

Monday's discussion centred on the Indian Ocean island nation's response to COVID-19, according to the Speaker. Members' interventions underlined the need for the Maldivian government to back only those bu-

sinesses which will “bounce back”, like fishing and not the otherwise vital tourism sector that has taken a big hit due to the global pandemic.

“The sentiment was that the government must focus on a way out, into prosperity again,” Mr. Nasheed told *The Hindu* from Male via phone. “The MPs took to the online session like fish to water.”

The Maldives currently has two COVID-19 positive patients, who returned from the U.K., undergoing treatment. The 13 cases detected earlier this month have been cured, says government spokesman Mabrook Azeez.

However, 870 Maldivians, and foreigners working in the island, who returned after foreign travels have been quarantined for observation. “Ten resorts have been converted to quarantine centres,” Mr. Azeez said.

ELSEWHERE



Netanyahu, aides placed under quarantine

JERUSALEM
Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his aides have been placed under precautionary quarantine after a staffer in his office tested positive for COVID-19, the Premier's office said on Monday. Mr. Netanyahu's office made clear that the quarantine decision was purely precautionary as he had not been in recent contact with the staffer. • AFP

24 policemen, fighters killed in Taliban attacks

KUNDUZ
The Taliban has killed about two dozen Afghan police and pro-government fighters, officials said on Monday, in two attacks. In one of the incidents late on Sunday, the insurgents killed at least six soldiers and 13 police and pro-government militiamen at outposts near a police building in Takhar, said police spokesman Khalil Assir. • AFP

Greek resistance hero Glezos passes away

He remained an activist even in old age

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
ATHENS

Manolis Glezos, who died Monday at the age of 97, was a Greek resistance hero who tore down the Nazi swastika flag from the Acropolis during the Second World War, survived two death sentences and remained an activist even in old age.

State TV ERT said he had died in an Athens hospital. Mr. Glezos was a loud voice on the Greek left throughout a life that saw him participate in a Communist plot that almost killed Winston Churchill and also saw him become the European Parliament's oldest deputy at the age of 91.

He opposed his government's austerity measures in the wake of the financial



Manolis Glezos. • AFP

crisis and campaigned for Germany to repay money it had forced Greece to loan it during the war.

Mr. Glezos was just 18 when, on May 30, 1941, he and friend Apostolos Santas, a 19-year-old law student, climbed onto the Acropolis in the middle of the night and tore down the swastika flag.

N. Korea hits out at Pompeo over remarks

REUTERS
SEOUL

North Korea said on Monday that U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo undermined its willingness to restart stalled denuclearisation talks, criticising his recent remarks on sanctions. Mr. Pompeo had said after a teleconference with G7 Foreign Ministers last week that all nations must remain united in calling for North Korea to return to negotiations and applying pressure over its missile programmes.

That comment highlighted the United States cannot reverse its hostile policy toward North Korea “no matter how excellent and firm the relationship” their two leaders have, state media KCNA said.

Virus halts N. Korean ships that sailed through sanctions

Satellite-images show vessels that once trafficked prohibited goods to and from China are idling

CHRISTOPH KOETTL

President Donald Trump has called the coronavirus “the invisible enemy.” But when it comes to sanctions on North Korea, the pathogen may turn out to be his administration's most effective ally.

North Korea's fear of coronavirus infection appears to have achieved what Mr. Trump's “maximum pressure” campaign against North Korean nuclear and missile work has not: choking the North's economy by stopping its trafficking of coal and other goods, prohibited under United Nations sanctions, which is believed to be mostly with China.

According to a satellite-image analysis published on Thursday by the Royal United Services Institute, a London-based research organi-



Trafficking halted: Satellite image of Nampo, a vital port region on North Korea's western coast, on March 13. • NYT

sation, and a review of additional satellite imagery by *The New York Times*, many North Korean commercial vessels that once carried sanctioned material to and from China – or transferred them illicitly ship-to-ship at sea – are now idled in their home ports.

The change, seen after North Korea sought to seal itself off two months ago as

neighbouring China battled the outbreak, effectively puts “an end to the large and coordinated efforts to evade United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UNSC) by shipping resources to China,” according to the analysis.

The new findings show for the first time how a large number of North Korean ships have moved back to

Nampo, a vital port on North Korea's western coast.

A draft of the forthcoming annual report from a U.N. panel states that North Korea “continued to flout UNSC resolutions through illicit maritime exports of commodities, notably coal and sand.

Such sales provide a revenue stream that has historically contributed to its nuclear and ballistic missile programmes.”

The report covers the time frame up to early February, and does not account for the impact of the pandemic. The Royal United Services Institute satellite analysis shows that on March 3, 139 ships were idled in the Nampo area, up from 50 ships a month earlier. The fleet includes vessels previously implicated in sanc-

tions evasion operations.

The recall of ships is part of North Korea's border closures, which started on January 22, the same time the Chinese authorities announced the shutdown of the city of Wuhan, the epicentre of the outbreak.

‘Economy will take a hit’
Park Jong-chol, professor at the Department of Social Studies Education at South Korea's Gyeongsang National University, said the economic impact on North Korea from idling so many ships is severe.

The long-term disruptions to North Korea's economy remain unclear. But analysts say it was reasonable to assume damage has been done to North Korean agriculture, industry and the overall economy. • NY TIMES