

Over 1,00,000 infected by COVID-19

Chinese exports fell by 17.2% in the first two months of the year because of the virus epidemic

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BEIJING

The number of cases from COVID-19 topped 1,00,000 worldwide as official data on Saturday showed a significant hit to Chinese exports after the deadly outbreak brought much of the country to a halt.

The World Health Organization (WHO) called the spread of the virus "deeply concerning" as a wave of countries reported their first cases of the disease - which has now killed more than 3,500 people and infected more than 1,00,000 across 94 nations and territories.

In China, where the outbreak began in December, the virus has wreaked havoc on the world's second-largest economy, shutting down businesses and disrupting global supply chains. The negative impact was shown in official data on Saturday, with China's exports plunging 17.2% in the first two months of the year.

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has urged "that all countries make containment their highest priority." Colombia, Costa Rica and Malta have announced their first cases.

2 deaths in Florida

Florida confirmed Friday two deaths from the virus - the first U.S. fatalities outside the west coast States of Washington and California - taking the country's death toll to 16. The number of infections in South Korea breached 7,000 on Saturday - the highest in the world outside China.

Two apartment blocks in Daegu - the fourth-largest city and the epicentre of its outbreak - have been quarantined after dozens of residents tested positive.

The number of cases re-



Stocking up: A Chinese woman picking up a shipment outside her apartment block on Saturday in Beijing. •GETTY IMAGES

corded in France rose to 716 with 11 deaths. Italy, meanwhile, began recruiting retired doctors on Saturday as part of urgent efforts to bolster the healthcare system with 20,000 additional staff.

In China, the number of new cases reported on Saturday nationwide was the lowest in weeks. The Chinese government has hinted it may soon lift the quarantine imposed on Hubei province - the locked-down epicentre where some 56 million people have been effectively housebound since late January. For the second consecutive day, there were no new cases reported in Hubei outside Wuhan, the province's capital. But the number of infections beyond the epicentre rose for the third straight day, fuelling fears about cases being brought into the country from overseas. There have now been 60 imported cases.

Many local authorities are imposing two-week quarantines on anyone who has travelled to virus-affected provinces or countries.

Lebanon set for debt default

REUTERS
BEIRUT

Lebanon's top leadership opposes repaying the country's debt, the presidency said on Saturday, setting the heavily indebted state on course for a sovereign default as it grapples with a financial crisis.

Prime Minister Hassan Diab was to announce the decision not to pay and call for negotiations with creditors to restructure the debt, a senior politician involved in the Eurobond discussions said.

A default on Lebanon's foreign currency debt will mark a new phase in a crisis that has hammered the economy since October, slicing around 40% off the value of the local currency.

Women worshippers allowed into Pak. mosque

Sunehri Masjid, located in Peshawar, was out of bounds to them for 23 years

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
PESHAWAR

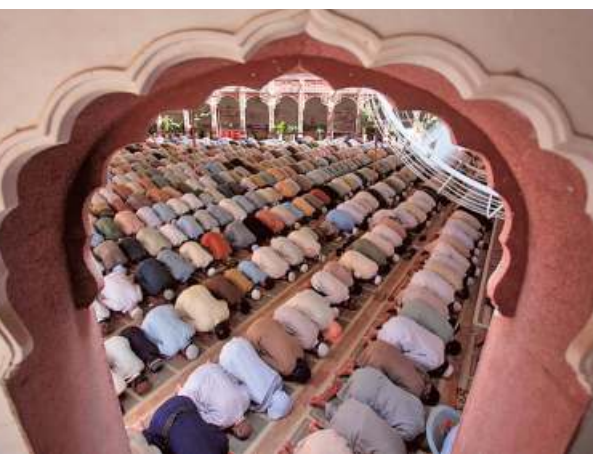
After a ban of 23 years, women worshippers can now pray at Peshawar's famous Sunehri Masjid, a move welcomed by women's groups, according to a media report.

Around 20 women offered prayers on Friday after the mosque administration announced the move, the *Dawn News* reported.

Separate hall

Provisions have been made for women to offer Friday prayers in the hall on the upper floor of the mosque, read a banner put up by the mosque administration. Women would also be allowed for Id prayers.

The mosque's Naib Imam Muhammad Ismail said till 1996 women were allowed to



Opening the doors: People attending Friday prayers at Sunehri Masjid in Peshawar in 2016. •REUTERS

attend Friday prayer congregations, but later they were stopped due to growing militancy.

"Now we have opened the upper portion again so that

worst-hit province, with 1,539 confirmed cases.

On Saturday, a newly elected conservative MP for the city was the second Iranian lawmaker killed by the virus, state news agency IRNA reported. Fatemeh Rahbar, 55, served as MP from 2004 to 2016 and was among the top candidates in Tehran for the conservatives, who overwhelmingly won February's general election. Iran has closed schools and universities until early April, as well as suspended major cultural and sporting events and reduced working hours across the country to slow the contagion, which has spread to all of its 31 provinces.

More than 300 of the new cases reported on Saturday were in Mazandaran province, a popular tourist destination north of Tehran on the Caspian sea.

Iranian lawmaker dead, country's toll rises to 145

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
TEHRAN

The death toll from COVID-19 in Iran continued to rise on Saturday with 21 more people killed, including a politician who became the eighth official to succumb to the disease. Health Ministry spokesman Kia-noush Jahanpour announced 1,076 additional cases had been confirmed in the past 24 hours, bringing the overall toll to 145 dead and 5,823 infected.

"More than 16,000 people are currently hospitalised as suspect cases," Mr. Jahanpour said during a news conference. He added that 1,669 people who were sick with the COVID-19 illness have recovered.

Iran is battling one of the world's deadliest outbreaks of the disease outside China, where it originated. The capital Tehran remains the

worst-hit province, with 1,539 confirmed cases.

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Quarantine facility collapses

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BEIJING

Around 70 people were trapped after the collapse of a hotel used as a COVID-19 quarantine facility in eastern China on Saturday evening. At least 38 people have so far been rescued from the rubble of the 80-room Xinjia hotel in coastal Quanzhou, said the local government. The hotel's facade appeared to have crumbled into the ground, exposing the building's steel frame.

Facebook closes London offices

REUTERS
LONDON

Facebook said on Friday that it is closing its London offices until Monday after a visiting employee from Singapore was diagnosed with COVID-19. Facebook also advised employees based in the affected area of its Singapore office to work from home until March 13.

Pope not to address crowds

REUTERS
VATICAN CITY

Pope Francis has cancelled his regular appearances in public to avoid crowds gathering to see him and will stream them on the Internet from inside the Vatican because of the COVID-19 outbreak in Italy. The Vatican said that on Sunday the pontiff will not address crowds from a window overlooking St. Peter's Square.

Saudi detains three royals over alleged 'coup' plot against MBS

Former Crown Prince among those picked up at a camp

REUTERS
RIYADH

Saudi Arabia has detained three senior Saudi Princes including Prince Ahmed bin Abdulaziz, the younger brother of King Salman, and Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, the King's nephew, for allegedly planning a coup, sources with knowledge of the matter said.

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, King Salman's son and de facto ruler of the country, the world's top oil exporter and a key U.S. ally, has moved to consolidate power since ousting Mohammed bin Nayef as heir to the throne in a 2017 palace coup.

Later that year, he arrested several royals and other prominent Saudis, holding them for months at Riyadh's Ritz-Carlton hotel in an anti-corruption campaign that caused shockwaves at home and abroad.

Five sources told Reuters that Prince Ahmed and Mohammed bin Nayef were detained in the latest operation. Three of the sources,



In happier times: Saudi King Salman, right, Mohammed bin Nayef, centre, and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, left, in Riyadh in a 2016 photo. •AFP

including a regional source, said Mohammed bin Nayef and his half-brother, Nawaf, were picked up at a private desert camp on Friday. Two sources said Prince Ahmed was taken from his home.

'Foreign powers'

Crown Prince Mohammed, also referred to as MBS, "accused them of conducting contacts with foreign powers, including the Americans and others, to carry out a coup d'etat," the regional source said. "With these arrests, MBS consolidated his full grip on power. The source indicated that no rivals remain to challenge his

succession to the throne.

Another source said the Princes were accused of "treason". A third source said they had been discussing a coup with the support of powerful tribes but had not reached advanced stages. The Saudi government media office did not respond to a request for comment on the detentions, first reported by *The Wall Street Journal*.

It was unclear where the Princes are being held. "They (Princes) have to be treated with dignity," the third source said, referring to their stature within the family.

Kabul victims describe carnage

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
KABUL

Kabul was reeling on Saturday after Islamic State jihadists killed 32 people and wounded dozens more, with injured survivors describing scenes of terror as gunmen opened fire in the deadliest attack to hit Afghanistan since a U.S.-Taliban deal.

The attack at a crowded gathering in the capital has raised questions about Afghanistan's abysmal security situation and uncertain future following the February

29 agreement to pull foreign forces from the country within 14 months.

Lying in a hospital bed in a run-down Kabul neighbourhood, Basira, 15, said she had attended Friday's annual commemoration ceremony for Abdul Ali Mazari - a politician from the Hazara ethnic group - for the first time, accompanied by her father and younger sister.

Zamin Ali, who suffered a bullet wound, said hundreds of people had assembled to watch the ceremony, when

the attackers began raining down gunfire. The Islamic State (IS) had claimed an attack on the same ceremony last year, which killed 11, and the group has in the past targeted Hazaras who are predominantly Shia Muslim.

Survivors expressed anger against the government for failing to improve security, with injured teenager Ms. Basira saying: "The political elites fled with their convoys and poor and innocent people were martyred and wounded".

U.K. police to review Dubai princess case

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
LONDON

British police said on Saturday that they were reviewing an investigation into the disappearance of the ruler of Dubai's daughter after a court found that she had been abducted by her father.

In a verdict, a British family court judge said that Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, who is Vice-President and Prime Minister of the UAE, had ordered the abduction of two of his adult daughters and their forcible return home. One of the women, Sheikh Shamsa, was taken from the English city of Cambridge when she was 19 in August 2000, the court found.

Trump replaces Chief of Staff for the third time

Meadows is among his strong defenders

REUTERS
PALM BEACH/WASHINGTON

U.S. President Donald Trump parted ways on Friday with acting White House Chief of Staff Mick Mulvaney and replaced him with conservative lawmaker and close ally Mark Meadows, who was a strong Trump defender during the Democratic impeachment drive.

Mr. Meadows takes over as the White House struggles to advance a consistent message about the COVID-19 crisis and as Mr. Trump goes into a bruising re-election contest. He becomes the fourth Chief of Staff in Mr. Trump's three years in office, tasked with attempting to bring order to a chaotic



Mark Meadows, who was chosen on Friday as the new Chief of Staff. •AFP

presidency. Mr. Trump named Mr. Mulvaney to be his special U.S. envoy to Northern Ireland, just as he prepares to welcome Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar to Washington for St. Patrick's Day ceremonies later this month.

SUDOKU

		8			3	7	2	
		6			5	9	8	
	9						3	4
3	7				1			
			4					
		8					1	3
1	8							9
	6	7	2			1		
	4	3	5			8		

DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★☆☆☆

Solution to yesterday's Sudoku

2	4	9	7	6	3	5	1	8
8	1	5	2	9	4	7	3	6
6	7	3	8	5	1	4	2	9
4	9	7	6	2	5	1	8	3
1	3	2	4	7	8	6	9	5
5	8	6	3	1	9	2	7	4
9	5	4	1	8	7	3	6	2
3	2	1	9	4	6	8	5	7
7	6	8	5	3	2	9	4	1

Sanders attacks Biden's record on trade

We are the stronger campaign to defeat Trump, says Senator ahead of key Michigan race

TRIP GABRIEL
MATT STEVENS
DETROIT

Calibrating his approach for a tough head-to-head primary match-up in a year when many Democratic voters want to put up a united front, Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont on Friday renewed his attacks on former Vice-President Joe Biden's record on trade while also conceding that Mr. Biden could defeat President Donald Trump.

In Michigan, where the Sanders campaign is running a TV ad featuring an autoworker who says his community has been "decimated" by free trade deals, Mr. Sanders attacked Mr. Biden for his support of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in the 1990s.

'Joe, you're wrong'

"Joe Biden and I have a very serious disagreement with regards to NAFTA," Mr. Sanders said at a round table he



The last phase: Supporters of candidate Bernie Sanders during a campaign rally in Detroit, Michigan, on Friday. •AFP

convened of workers, union leaders and economists in Detroit before a rally attended by thousands. "Just last year - I'm not talking about 20 years ago - Joe said that voting for NAFTA, quote, was not a mistake, end of quote, and a few years before that he called NAFTA a success," Mr. Sanders said. "Joe, you're wrong. NAFTA was not a success. Voting for it was a big, big mistake."

As a long line of mostly young supporters filed into a downtown convention

centre, organisers called out for any union members to identify themselves.

After major disappointments on Super Tuesday, Mr. Sanders is hoping for a comeback next Tuesday as six States go to the polls, none more crucial for him than Michigan, the first of several Midwestern industrial States to vote in the next two weeks. Four years ago, he pulled off one of the biggest surprises of his first campaign when he upset Hillary Clinton in Michigan.

Speaking earlier on Friday with reporters in Phoenix, Mr. Sanders also condemned Mr. Biden's votes as a Senator on trade agreements, while brandishing new attacks over Mr. Biden's record on federal funding for abortions, same-sex marriage and the former "don't ask, don't tell" policy.

'Biden can beat Trump'

But in a sign of the careful approach both candidates are taking while seeking to draw distinctions between their campaigns, Mr. Sanders reiterated multiple times that he would support Mr. Biden if he eventually won the presidential nomination, and, pressed by a reporter, said he believed Mr. Biden could beat Mr. Trump in November.

"I think we are the stronger campaign to defeat Donald Trump, but you have not heard me say that I think that Biden cannot defeat Trump," Mr. Sanders said. "I will certainly do everything I

can if he is the nominee."

At a private fundraiser in Bethesda, Maryland, on Friday night, Mr. Biden said: "What we can't let happen is let this primary become a negative bloodbath. I know I'm going to get a lot of suggestions on how to respond to what I suspect will be an increasingly negative campaign that the Bernie Brothers will run. But we can't tear this party apart and reelect Trump."

The Biden campaign sent one of its most high-profile new surrogates to Michigan, Sen. Amy Klobuchar, but she was far less visible than Mr. Sanders. She toured the backstage areas of an MGM Grand hotel and casino with union leaders, but the event was off-limits to out-of-town reporters.

Moving forward, the candidates will essentially go head-to-head next week in six States including Michigan, which will present one of their first tests in a major swing State. NY TIMES

ELSEWHERE



No ceasefire violation in Idlib, says Turkey

ISTANBUL Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar said there had been no violations of the ceasefire in Syria's Idlib, as part of the agreement with Russia, the Defence Ministry said on Saturday. "We will continue to be a deterrent force to prevent any violation to the ceasefire. None occurred since [it] entered into force," he said. AFP

Russians held in Sweden over attack on blogger

STOCKHOLM Two Russian citizens have been arrested in Sweden suspected of a hammer attack last month on a blogger critical of Chechen strongman leader Ramzan Kadyrov, media reported on Saturday. The Chechen blogger claimed the man was sent by Russia to kill him. AFP