

U.S. reports highest daily death toll

2,108 people die in America in one day as global toll surges past 103,000; Trump says the peak is near

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
ROME

The U.S. became the first country to report more than 2,000 coronavirus deaths in a single day, marking a grim milestone as billions around the world celebrated the Easter holiday weekend under lockdown from home.

The global death toll from the virus surged past 103,000 on Friday, with the U.S. quickly becoming the epicentre of the pandemic that first emerged in China late last year. Europe has so far shouldered the majority of all deaths and infections — though there were signs of hope the curve could be starting to flatten in some of



Front-line warriors: Nurses and healthcare workers in Manhattan, New York, on Friday mourning and remembering their colleagues who died due to the outbreak. • AFP

COVID-19

the hardest-hit countries.

In France, nearly 1,000 new deaths were confirmed on Friday but the country reported a drop in the number of intensive care patients for a second day running. Italy, meanwhile, said the number of daily deaths was starting to level off — though the government resisted pressure to lift its lockdown, extending confinement measures until May 3.

Most deaths in Italy

With 18,849 dead, Italy has the highest global death toll, but it is likely soon to be surpassed by the U.S. where fatalities continued to mount this week. On Friday, the U.S. reported 2,108 new deaths, the highest daily toll out of any country since the outbreak was first reported in the central Chinese city of Wuhan in December.

With more than half a million reported infections, the U.S. already has more coronavirus cases than anywhere

else in the world. The global infection rate now stands at more than 1.7 million, though with many countries only testing the most serious cases, the numbers are likely far higher. But President Donald Trump said that with the U.S. infection trajectory “near the peak” and social distancing working well, he was considering ways to reopen the world’s biggest economy as soon as possible. He acknowledged the risk of higher death tolls if businesses restart too soon — after the World Health Organization on Friday cautioned countries against lifting lockdown measures too quickly.

“But you know what? Staying at home leads to death also,” Mr. Trump added, pointing to the economic suffering for millions of Americans. It is unclear when that will be possible, with New York Governor Andrew Cuomo saying millions in the State will have to be tested before it can reopen.

U.S. General meets Taliban leaders

The militants have accused Washington of violating pact

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
KABUL

The head of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan has met with Taliban leaders to discuss a reduction in violence in the war-weary country, officials said on Saturday, with the insurgents accusing the Americans of violating a landmark agreement.

Washington signed a key deal with the Taliban in February that promised the withdrawal of U.S. and foreign troops from Afghanistan by next summer, provided the militants start talks with Kabul and adhere to other guarantees.

U.S. General Scott Miller held discussions with the group in Doha on Friday night, U.S. forces spokesman Sonny Leggett said. “General Miller met with Taliban leadership last night as part of the military channel estab-



An Afghan soldier guarding a checkpoint near the Bagram base earlier this month. • AP

lished in the agreement. The meeting was about the need to reduce the violence,” he said.

Suhail Shaheen, a Taliban spokesman, said the meeting was about the “implementation of the agreement as well as its violations, particularly attacks and night raids in non-combat areas”.

The Taliban has accused U.S. forces of aiding the Afghan government with air support, causing civilian casualties. The U.S. has denied the accusations.

‘False allegations’

A U.S. defence official accused the Taliban of making false allegations in a bid to pressure the U.S. into pushing forward a prisoner release swap with Kabul.

The deal requires the Afghan government — which was not a signatory to the accord — to free up to 5,000 Taliban prisoners, and for the militants to release 1,000 pro-government captives in return.

A Taliban team met with the government to discuss a comprehensive prisoner swap last week, but walked out of the talks soon after officials offered a piecemeal release of the prisoners.

ELSEWHERE



Johnson making very good progress: officials

LONDON British Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Saturday was making “very good progress” in his recovery in hospital from coronavirus, officials said, two days after leaving intensive care. The 55-year-old leader was hospitalised on Sunday. • AFP

Cuba hits out at ‘cruel’ U.S. sanctions

HAVANA Cuba hit out at the U.S. on Friday over its nearly 60-year-old embargo, which Havana described as “even more cruel” given the suffering caused by COVID-19. “The United States’ economic-financial blockade is the most unfair, severe, prolonged system of sanctions of all time by one country against another,” said Nestor Marimon, a Health Ministry official. • AFP

Spain’s daily toll falls again

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
MADRID

Spain registered a fall in its daily death toll from the new coronavirus for a third consecutive day on Saturday with 510 people dying, the government said. It was the smallest daily increase since March 23 in Spain, which is suffering one of the worst COVID-19 outbreaks in the world.

The update for the last 24 hours raised the country’s overall number of fatalities to 16,353 and the number of confirmed cases to 161,852.

China reports rise in imported cases

REUTERS
WUHAN

China reported on Saturday a rise in new coronavirus infections, mostly in travellers arriving from abroad, as doctors in the central city of Wuhan, where the virus initially emerged, warned its behaviour was still not well-understood.

Tough curbs imposed in China since January have reined in infections sharply since the height of the pandemic in February, although it has spread worldwide to infect 1.6 million people with 1,00,000 deaths. But Chinese authorities fear the possibility of a second wave triggered by arrivals from overseas or asymptomatic patients.

“We can’t say that there is no such potential risk,” said



A passenger at the Tianhe Airport in Wuhan. • AFP

Wang Xinghuan, president of Wuhan’s Leishenshan hospital, its second built especially for virus patients.

While some experts do not expect a big second wave, thanks to China’s stringent controls, the possibility could not be ignored, he told reporters.

“At present, from the hospital perspective, our understanding of the virus is still very insufficient,” Mr. Wang said, during a hospital tour organised by Wuhan officials.

For instance, it was not immediately clear how infectious asymptomatic people were, he added. The National Health Commission said 46 new cases were reported on Friday, including 42 from abroad, up from 42 a day earlier, as Hubei province, whose capital is Wuhan, reported no new cases for a seventh successive day.

Of the new imported cases, 22 were in the northeastern province of Heilongjiang, where Chinese nationals crossing over the border from Russia figured in a recent spike in cases.

U.S. announces visa sanctions on nations refusing to accept citizens

Order comes in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic

SRIRAM LAKSHMAN
CHENNAI

President Donald Trump has ordered the relevant departments of his administration to impose visa sanctions on countries that do not accept their citizens who are currently in the U.S., if the U.S. seeks to repatriate them to their home countries.

The order is motivated by the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a memorandum issued by the White House on Friday night.

“Countries that deny or unreasonably delay the acceptance of their citizens, subjects, nationals, or residents from the United States during the ongoing pandemic caused by SARS-CoV-2 create unacceptable public health risks for Americans. The United States must be

able to effectuate the repatriation of foreign nationals who violate the laws of the United States,” the order says.

Scope of the order

As it is worded, the scope of the order is unclear. While the clause above says it is motivated by the U.S. wanting to repatriate foreigners violating U.S. laws, there is another clause that says the sanctions process could be initiated if a foreign country delays accepting its nationals and such an action hampers the U.S.’s response to the ongoing pandemic.

The Secretary of Homeland Security shall inform the Secretary of State, “... if any government of a foreign country denies or unreasonably delays the acceptance

of aliens who are citizens, subjects, nationals, or residents of that country after being asked to accept those aliens, and if such denial or delay is impeding operations of the Department of Homeland Security necessary to respond to the ongoing pandemic caused by SARS-CoV-2.”

Within seven days of receiving such a notice from the Department of Homeland Security, the Secretary of State is required to initiate a plan to impose visa sanctions.

Sanctions shall end when the Secretary of Homeland Security certifies that the host countries are accepting their nationals.

The memorandum expires on December 31 this year unless extended.

Virus kills Brazil tribal boy

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BRASILIA

A Yanomami indigenous boy has died after contracting COVID-19, authorities in Brazil said on Friday, raising fears for the Amazon tribe, which is known for its vulnerability to disease. The 15-year-old boy, the first Yanomami to be diagnosed with the virus, was hospitalised a week ago at an intensive care unit in Boa Vista, the capital of the northern State of Roraima, officials said.

He died of severe respiratory complications on Thursday night, said the Brazilian Health Ministry.

A Yanomami rights group said the boy had come in to contact with “many” other indigenous people after he began showing symptoms. The Hutukara Associa-



A Yanomami settlement in Venezuela, near its border with Brazil. • REUTERS

tion blamed “inadequate medical care” for the boy’s death, saying he went more than two weeks without a diagnosis from the time he first went to the hospital with symptoms. It called on the authorities to help them undergo testing and self-isolation. It also urged the government to crack down on illegal gold miners on indigenous lands, believed to be the source of the contagion.

Apple, Google plan software to slow spread of virus

REUTERS

San Francisco Apple Inc and Alphabet Inc’s Google said on Friday that they will work together to create contact tracing technology that aims to slow the spread of the coronavirus by allowing users to opt in to logging other phones they have been near.

The rare collaboration between the two Silicon Valley companies could accelerate usage of apps that aim to get potentially infected individuals into testing or quarantine more quickly and reliably than existing systems in much of the world. Such tracing will play a vital role in managing the virus once lockdown orders end, health experts say.

To be effective, the Silicon Valley system would require millions of people to opt in to the system, trusting the technology companies’ safeguards, as well as smooth oversight by public health systems. Under the plan, users’ phones with the technology will emit unique Bluetooth signals.

People who test positive for the virus can opt to send an encrypted list of phones they came near to Apple and Google, which will trigger alerts to potentially exposed users to seek more information. Public health authorities would need to sign off that an individual has tested positive before they can send on the data. The logs will be scrambled to keep infected individuals’ data anonymous, even to Apple, Google and contact tracing app makers, the companies said. Apple and Google said their system will not track GPS location.

Taiwan, WHO clash over ‘early warning’ claim

Health body accused of ignoring alert on human-to-human transmission

ANANTH KRISHNAN
CHENNAI

Taiwan on Saturday released the text of its December 31 communication with the World Health Organization (WHO) that has been at the centre of a controversy about the first warnings of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Both Taiwan and the U.S. had accused the WHO of ignoring a December 31 warning of “human-to-human transmissions” from what was then an unknown pneumonia.

On Saturday, Taiwan’s Health Minister Chen Shih-chung quoted the text of the December 31 email, which read: “News resources today indicate that at least seven atypical pneumonia cases were reported in Wuhan, China. Their health authorities replied to the media that the cases were believed not to be SARS, however, the

samples are still under examination, and cases have been isolated for treatment. I would greatly appreciate if you have relevant information to share with us.”

The email did not mention human-to-human transmissions, but Taiwan’s Foreign Ministry, in a tweet, said, “treated in isolation means human-to-human transmission”.

Alert to WHO on Jan. 5 The communication did not, however, carry additional information beyond what the WHO had been informed by Wuhan authorities. The WHO said on January 5 that its country office in China was on December 31 “informed of cases of pneumonia of unknown etiology (unknown cause)” and “national authorities report that all patients are isolated and receiving treatment in



Taiwan’s Minister of Health Chen Shih-chung. • AFP

Wuhan medical institutions.” “Based on the preliminary information from the Chinese investigation team,” the WHO concluded then, “no evidence of significant human-to-human transmission and no healthcare worker infections have been reported”.

Beyond the early warning controversy, the WHO has faced broader criticism for some of its early actions as the outbreak was spreading.

Crime drops globally as virus keeps people indoors

From the U.S. to Africa, major crimes are falling but officials worry about a surge in domestic violence

ASSOCIATED PRESS
CHICAGO

The COVID-19 pandemic that has crippled big-box retailers and mom and pop shops worldwide may be making a dent in illicit business, too.

In Chicago, one of America’s most violent cities, drug arrests have plummeted 42% in the weeks since the city shut down, compared with the same period last year. Part of that decrease, some criminal lawyers say, is that drug dealers have no choice but to wait out the economic slump.

“The feedback I’m getting is that they aren’t able to move, to sell anything anywhere,” said Joseph Lopez, a criminal lawyer in Chicago who represents reputed drug dealers.

Overall, Chicago’s crime declined 10% after the pandemic struck, a trend playing out globally as cities report stunning crime drops in



Leading the fight: Medical workers in New York, which has seen a double-digit drop in crime in recent months. • REUTERS

the weeks since measures were put in place to slow the spread of the virus. Even among regions that have the highest levels of violence outside a war zone, fewer people are being killed and fewer robberies are taking place.

Still, law enforcement officials worry about a surge of unreported domestic violence, and what happens

when restrictions lift — or go on too long.

It’s rare for a city to see a double-digit drop in crime, even over a much longer period. During New York City’s 1990s crime decline, one of the biggest turnarounds in American history, crime dropped about 40% over three years. That makes the drop-offs occurring now — in a period of just a couple of

weeks — even more seismic. Across Latin America, crime is down to levels unseen in decades. El Salvador reported an average of two killings a day last month, down from a peak of 600 a day a few years ago.

Limits on movement

Much of the decrease has taken place because of tougher security policies and gang truces. But the imposition of near-total limits on movement is likely driving it down further, according to analysts and national statistics.

In Peru, where crime levels fell 84% last month, Lima mortician Rawl Gonzalez usually has as many as 15 bodies a day — many are homicide victims.

This week, he napped on a bench after six hours without a client.

“There are almost no killings or car accidents these days,” Mr. Gonzalez said.

In South Africa, police reported a stunning decline during their first week of lockdown measures. Police Minister Bheki Cele said reported rapes were down from 700 to 101 over the same period last year. Serious assault cases plummeted from 2,673 to 456, and murders fell from 326 to 94.

The U.S. virus epicentre in New York saw major crimes decrease by 12% from February to March. In Los Angeles, 2020 key crimes statistics were consistent with last year’s figures until the week of March 15, when they dropped by 30%.

“There’s a lot fewer opportunities for criminals to take advantage of,” said Joe Giacalone, a former New York Police Department sergeant who now teaches at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. “Most burglars, they wait for you to leave the house.”

Pacifist Japanese director Nobuhiko Obayashi dead

He depicted war’s horrors in his works

ASSOCIATED PRESS
TOKYO

Nobuhiko Obayashi, one of Japan’s most prolific filmmakers who devoted his works to depicting war’s horrors and singing the eternal power of movies, has died. He was 82. The official site for his latest film, *Labyrinth of Cinema*, said that he died late on Friday.

Mr. Obayashi was diagnosed with terminal cancer in 2016, and was told he had just a few months. But he continued working, appearing frail and often in a wheelchair. He stayed stubbornly true to his core pacifist message through more than 40 movies and thousands of TV shows, commercials and other videos.

Mr. Obayashi’s *Miss Lonely*, released in 1985, was shot in seaside Onomichi, the picturesque town in Hi-



Nobuhiko Obayashi in a 2019 photo. • AP

roshima prefecture where Mr. Obayashi grew up and made animation clips by hand.

Mr. Obayashi was a trailblazer in the world of Japanese TV commercials, hiring foreign movie stars like Catherine Deneuve and Charles Bronson, highlighted in his slick film work that seemed to symbolise Japan’s post-war modernisation.