

Deadly pandemics

COVID-19 has spread to nearly every country in the world since it first emerged in China three months ago, drawing parallels with some of history's deadliest pandemics

ESTIMATED NUMBER OF PEOPLE KILLED IN PANDEMICS (1900-2020)

1918-19
'Spanish flu'
(H1N1 virus)

At least 50 million deaths
About 500 million people were infected (one-third of the world's population)

1957-58
'Asian flu'
(H2N2 virus)

1.1 million

1968-69
'Hong Kong flu'
(H3N2 virus)

1 million

2009-10
'Swine flu'
(H1N1 virus)

575,000

2019
COVID-19

Over 43,000 (as of April 1, 2020)
Over 874,000 people infected

'Spanish flu' was the most severe pandemic. It was also caused by an H1N1 virus, with genes of avian origin, and claimed the lives of 50 million people from 1918 to 1919.

VIRUS REPRODUCTIVE NUMBER: Average number of new infections generated by each infected person

U.S. President Trump warned Americans of a "hell of a bad two weeks" as Deborah Birx, the White House coordinator on COVID-19, projected 1,00,000 to 2,40,000 deaths in the U.S.

COVID-19
2.2

Spanish flu/
Hong Kong flu
1.8

Asian flu
1.6

Swine flu
1.5

Seasonal flu
1.3

Source: GraphicNews, Johns Hopkins University

World could face a food crisis: UN, WTO

White House's COVID-19 coordinator projects a range of 1,00,000 to 2,40,000 deaths in the U.S.

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
PARIS

The heads of three global agencies warned on Wednesday of the risk of a worldwide "food shortage" if authorities fail to manage the ongoing COVID-19 crisis properly.

Many governments around the world have put their populations on lockdown causing severe slowdowns in international trade and food supply chains. Panic buying by people going into confinement has already demonstrated the fragility of supply chains as supermarket shelves emptied in many countries.

"Uncertainty about food availability can spark a wave of export restrictions, creating a shortage on the global market," said the joint text signed by Qu Dongyu, head of the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director-general of the World Health Organization (WHO) and Roberto Azevedo, director of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

"In the midst of the COVID-19 lockdowns, every effort must be made to ensure that trade flows as freely as possible, specially to avoid food shortage(s) from deve-

loping, they said in their statement.

"When acting to protect the health and well-being of their citizens, countries should ensure that any trade-related measures do not disrupt the food supply chain," they added.

U.K.'s highest daily toll
Meanwhile, Britain reported 563 deaths on Wednesday, the first time the national toll has exceeded 500, bringing the total fatalities to 2,352, according to official figures. The U.K. government came under renewed pressure to ramp up mass testing of frontline medical staff and the wider community.

In the U.S., President Donald Trump warned of a "very painful" two weeks. "This is going to be a very painful, a very, very painful two weeks," Mr. Trump told a press conference at the White House.

"I want every American to be prepared for the hard days that lie ahead," he said.

Deborah Birx, COVID-19 response coordinator at the White House, displayed a chart projecting a range of 100,000 to 240,000 deaths in the U.S., when current efforts at mitigation are taken into account.

Putin working remotely after doctor tests positive

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
MOSCOW

Russian leader Vladimir Putin has decided to handle his duties remotely, the Kremlin said on Wednesday, after the head of the country's main COVID-19-focused hospital tested positive following a meeting with the President.

Denis Protsenko met Mr. Putin last week as the Russian leader visited the Kom-

munarka hospital in Moscow. "The President prefers these days to work remotely," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told journalists, shortly before Mr. Putin was due to hold a Cabinet meeting by videoconference.

"We are taking all precautionary measures," he said, adding that Mr. Putin was at the presidential residence in Novo-Ogaryovo.

Spain toll hits 9,053 as virus cases pass 1,00,000

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
MADRID

The COVID-19 death toll in Spain surged over 9,000 on Wednesday after a record 864 deaths in 24 hours, with the number of confirmed cases passing the 1,00,000 mark, the government said.

Spain has the world's second-highest death toll after Italy, with the virus so far claiming 9,053 lives and the

number of confirmed cases reaching 1,02,136.

But on a day-to-day basis, the rate of new infections continued its downward trend, showing an increase of just over 8.0%, compared with nearly 11% on Tuesday, Health Ministry figures showed. And the death rate has also slowed, from 27% a week ago to 10.5% on Wednesday.

11-year-old Indonesian girl dies

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
JAKARTA

An 11-year-old girl has become Indonesia's youngest person to die after contracting COVID-19, officials said on Wednesday. The girl, who was also suffering from dengue fever, was admitted to hospital on Madura Island off the coast of Java on March 19.

Number of cases in Pak. crosses 2,000

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
ISLAMABAD

The number of COVID-19 cases in Pakistan surpassed 2,000 on Wednesday, indicating an upward trend. The government said that 105 new patients tested positive for the virus in the last 24 hours, taking the number of cases to 2,039.

Sri Lanka needs to scale up testing, say govt. doctors

Number of positive cases reported in Sri Lanka so far is 146

MEERA SRINIVASAN
COLOMBO

A powerful trade union of government doctors in Sri Lanka has urged authorities to scale up testing to contain the spread of COVID-19 cases within the country. The number of positive cases reported in Sri Lanka so far is 146.

According to the Government Medical Officer's Association (GMOA), around 80% of the patients infected by SARS-CoV-2 show mild symptoms. "Hence, there is the possibility that they will remain unidentified as carriers of the new coronavirus... those who are in close contact with them too will go undetected unless they start showing symptoms. If tests are carried out, they can be identified early," the GMOA said in a statement published in *the Daily FT*.

Sri Lanka's state-run Medical Research Institute and eight other designated centres are currently conducting COVID-19 tests, according to health officials. So far, nearly 2,500 tests have been conducted in all.

"We are still largely testing only those with suspected symptoms," Dr. Nalinda Herath of the GMOA, which



Combating the virus: A special unit of the Sri Lankan police patrolling a street during a curfew in Kalutara. • AFP

is also known to be politically influential. "We have conveyed this to the government and hope they will scale up the tests soon," he told *The Hindu*.

'Don't lift curfew'

The GMOA has also suggested that the government should not lift the curfew - which it has been doing in select districts - pointing to the higher risk of transmission on days when people gather in public places. Sri Lanka has been on a nationwide curfew for over 10 days now, with the government partially lifting it in select districts for a few hours. On Tuesday, health authorities reported 21 cases, the highest number detected since

the coronavirus outbreak in Sri Lanka. According to a situation report released by the Epidemiology Unit of the Ministry of Health, Colombo district has recorded the highest number of COVID-19 cases in the country - a total of 32 of the total 146.

Direct-General of Health Services Anil Jasinghe said health authorities were planning to carry out sample testing among those in "high risk groups". "So far, we have confined testing to those who are in quarantine centres, but we want to get an assessment of the spread of the virus in the community. For this, we plan to start sample testing shortly," Dr. Jasinghe said, according to media reports.

1,367 asymptomatic cases in China

REUTERS
BEIJING

China reported dwindling new infections on Wednesday and for the first time disclosed the number of asymptomatic cases, which could complicate how trends in the outbreak are read.

Almost all of Tuesday's 36 new cases involved overseas arrivals, the National Health Commission said, down from 48 a day ago, and taking total infections to 81,554.

But that figure excludes 130 new sufferers of the disease who do not show symptoms, its statistics showed.

China has decided to devote greater screening to asymptomatic sufferers and those in contact with them. In remarks during a visit to the eastern province of Zhejiang, President Xi Jinping urged better management of symptom-free cases.

As of Tuesday, there were about 20,000 people under observation, the commis-

sion said, though they may not necessarily be carriers. On Tuesday, 1,367 asymptomatic cases were under observation in China, down from 1,541 the previous day, the Health Commission said.

Citing classified data, the *South China Morning Post* said China had found more than 43,000 cases of asymptomatic infection through contact tracing. Seven deaths from the virus were reported on Tuesday, up from just one a day ago.

India welcomes Ghani's talk team

Govt. calls Afghan leader's decision to form a team for dialogue a 'positive step'

SUHASINI HAIDAR
NEW DELHI

Welcoming Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani's decision to form a team for intra-Afghan negotiations that will include the Taliban, the government said this is a "positive step" for the process of reconciliation in the country.

"We view the formation of the team as a positive step which would lead to a peaceful and stable future for Afghanistan free from the scourge of externally sponsored terrorism," said a statement issued by the Ministry of External Affairs. The statement followed a conversation between External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to discuss cooperation on the COVID-19 pandemic.

MEA sources said there had also been a "discussion



The way forward: A file photo of Taliban militants at the Pul-e-Charkhi Jail in Kabul. • AP

on the situation in Afghanistan". They said Mr. Pompeo had condoled with Mr. Jaishankar on the death of an Indian national in the March 25 Kabul gurdwara attack, and both leaders resolved to keep exchanging notes on the developing situation.

India's statement also follows similar statements by the UN's mission in Afghanistan UNAMA, other countries

and even Mr. Ghani's arch political rival former Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, that have all hailed his announcement on March 27 of a 21-member negotiating team that included five women, to talk to the Taliban.

Although the Taliban rejected the announcement initially, claiming that it was not "inclusive enough", the group sent a delegation to

the Bagram Base outside Kabul on Tuesday to talk about the release of prisoners that had been decided in the U.S.-Taliban agreement in February.

Technical measures

"They (the Taliban delegation) will pursue the issue of release of the prisoners and will conduct the necessary technical measures," Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid, tweeted.

The issue of the prisoners release, including 5,000 held by the government and 1,000 by the Taliban, has been a sticking point in the deal, and has meant that intra-Afghan talks planned for March 12 had to be put off.

India sent its envoy to witness the signing of the U.S.-Taliban deal but has been cautious in welcoming its content and sceptical of dealing with the Taliban.

Trump says ready to help end Saudi-Russian oil price war

Riyadh said it would raise exports further after talks failed

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
WASHINGTON

U.S. President Donald Trump said on Tuesday he was ready to help resolve an escalating oil price war between Russia and Saudi Arabia that has helped push crude benchmarks to 17-year lows.

The threat of a global recession triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic had already hammered prices when Riyadh said last month it would raise exports after a production-cut agreement among top producers flopped in early March.

On Monday, Saudi Arabia said it would increase exports further to a record 10.6 million barrels per day from May, deepening a global supply glut as crude recorded its



Donald Trump

biggest monthly and quarterly price plunges in history.

Mr. Trump said he had spoken with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman by phone with the aim of halting the slide.

"The two countries are discussing it. And I am join-

ing at the appropriate time, if need be," Trump said.

Saudi Arabia had been exporting around 7.0 million barrels per day under an output reduction agreement among 24-member producer alliance known as OPEC+, which included Russia. OPEC+ failed to reach a deal on further production cuts to shore up sagging prices.

Analysts say Riyadh is engaged in a deliberate long-term strategy to capture greater market share by pressuring its high-cost rivals. "Saudi policy will not just drive more expensive forms of oil production out of the market; it will also make it harder for renewable energy to compete with fossil fuels," said Bernard Haykel, a Saudi expert at Princeton University.

ELSEWHERE



Adidas says 'sorry' after uproar over rent payment

FRANKFURT

German sportsgear maker Adidas on Wednesday said it had made "a mistake" when it decided not to pay rent on its shuttered shops in April, after the move sparked a widespread outcry. "We made a mistake. We would like to apologise. We have paid our rent," the firm said. • AFP

Iran floods leave 21 dead

TEHRAN

Flooding in Iran caused by heavy rainfall has left 21 people dead and one missing, an emergency services spokesman said on Wednesday. Mojtaba Khaledi said that 22 people had also been injured, with most of the casualties in southern or central provinces. He said 11 people had died in Fars province alone. • AFP

North Korea claims no virus case, says it took early drastic steps

Regime has sealed borders and shut off business with China, but experts question its claim about zero infection

CHOE SANG-HUN
SEOUL

Shin Dong Yun, a scientist from the North Korean Institute of Virology, rushed to the northwestern border with China in early February. There, he conducted 300 tests, skipping meals to assess a stream of people so that "the country is protected from the invasion of the novel coronavirus".

Stories like this, carried in the state-run newspaper *Rodong Sinmun*, focus attention on one of the stranger oddities surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic: How could North Korea claim to not have a single coronavirus



Stringent measures: Pedestrians in Pyongyang. • AP

case while countries around the world stagger under the exploding epidemic?

North Korea has taken some of the most drastic actions against the virus and

did so sooner than most other nations. It sealed its borders in late January, shutting off business with neighbouring China, which accounts for nine-tenths of its external

trade. It clamped down on the smugglers who keep its thriving unofficial markets functioning. It quarantined all diplomats in Pyongyang for a month. The totalitarian state's singular ability to control the movement of people also bolsters its disease-control efforts.

But decades of isolation and international sanctions have ravaged North Korea's public health system.

"You can see immediately what's going to happen if you get a surge of COVID-19 patients streaming in," said Dr. Kee B. Park, a lecturer at Harvard Medical School who has worked alongside North Ko-

rean doctors to help improve the country's health system. "It will overwhelm the system very quickly."

Lack of testing

Many observers of North Korea doubt its claims of not having any coronavirus cases. But a lack of testing equipment may mean it literally has not detected a single case, said Mr. Park.

Some accuse North Korea of hiding an outbreak to preserve order.

"It's a blatant lie when they say they have no cases," said Seo Jae-pyoung, secretary-general of the Seoul-based Association of North

Korean Defectors, who said he heard from his North Korean contact that a family of three and an elderly couple died of the virus in the east coast city of Chongjin in mid-March.

The North's leader, Kim Jong-un, is clearly aware of the threat the virus poses to his country's decrepit health system. Around when Washington announced February 13 that it would allow coronavirus-related humanitarian shipments, North Korea made a rare request for urgent help from relief groups, including diagnostic kits, according to people familiar with the matter. • NY TIMES

Iran warns U.S. after it deploys 'Patriot' to Iraq

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
TEHRAN

Iran warned the U.S. on Wednesday that it was leading West Asia to disaster in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic after it deployed Patriot air defence missiles to Iraq.

Washington had been in talks with Baghdad about the proposed deployment since January but it was not immediately clear whether it had secured its approval or not.

Iran, which wields huge influence in its western neighbour, said that it had not.

The U.S. deployment runs "counter to the official

position of the Iraqi government, Parliament and people," a Foreign Ministry statement said.

It called for a halt to "war-mongering during the coronavirus outbreak" and warned that U.S. military activities in the region could lead it to "instability and disaster".

U.S. forces should "respect the wishes of the Iraqi people and government and leave the country," the Iranian Foreign Ministry added.

The deployment of the missile system comes after a spate of rocket attacks on bases and other facilities used by US personnel.