

# Global virus cases near a million as Spain sees record deaths

Europe is at the centre of the crisis, with 34,000 dead; U.S. toll crosses 5,000

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE MADRID

Confirmed coronavirus cases approached 1 million around the world on Thursday as Europe reeled from the pandemic and the U.S. reported record numbers of people out of work.

The virus claimed thousands more lives in its relentless march across the globe, including nearly 1,000 new deaths in Spain, despite more than half of the planet being subjected to some form of lockdown.

And it continued to wreak havoc on the global economy, with the U.S. announcing that another 6.65 million workers filed for unemployment benefits last week and Spain reporting its biggest monthly increase in jobless claims on record.

Since emerging in China in December, COVID-19 has infected 9,81,221 people — including at least 5,00,000 in



**Gloom and doom:** Members of the Spanish Red Cross transferring a COVID-19 patient to a nursing home in Huesca. • GETTY IMAGES

## COVID-19

Europe — and claimed more than 50,000 lives.

Europe has been at the centre of the crisis, with at least 34,000 now dead, but there have been signs the epidemic could be approaching its peak.

Spain said on Thursday it had suffered a record 950 deaths in 24 hours, bringing its total number of fatalities to 10,003.

The number of confirmed Spanish cases passed the 1,10,000 mark, the govern-

## Netanyahu in quarantine

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE JERUSALEM

Israeli Health Minister Yaakov Litzman, a leading member of the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community, has tested positive for COVID-19, forcing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to enter precautionary quarantine, officials said.

ment said, although the rates of both new infections and deaths continued a downward trend.

“The data show the curve has stabilised” and the epidemic has entered a “slow-down” phase, Health Minister Salvador Illa said.

## Iran death toll rises to 3,160

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE TEHRAN

Iran on Thursday reported 124 new deaths, raising its total to 3,160. At least 3,111 new infections were reported over the past 24 hours, taking the country's tally to 50,468. Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani tested positive for COVID-19, state television reported.

Italy has also seen its infection rates slow and eyes will now be on Britain and France, which both reported their highest daily death tolls on Wednesday.

The U.S., which now accounts for almost a quarter of reported global infec-

## Indonesia frees 18,000 inmates

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE MAJENE

Indonesia has released 18,000 inmates in a bid to stop the novel coronavirus from rampaging through its notoriously overcrowded prison system. The mass release comes days after the country announced that it would free more than 30,000 inmates.

tions, saw its death toll pass 5,000 by the early hours of Thursday, according to a tally by Johns Hopkins University. Among the latest known fatalities was a six-week-old baby who was taken to a Connecticut hospital late last week.

## INTERVIEW | DALI YANG

# ‘Wuhan initially downplayed crisis’

Prof. Dali Yang explains how the outbreak slipped through China's system

ANANTH KRISHNAN

*On December 31, Wuhan announced an outbreak of viral pneumonia. Until January 19, authorities would maintain there was no proof of human-to-human transmission but the following day, China's government would reveal otherwise. Decisions taken during those vital 21 days would come to affect the lives of millions. Studies suggest while China's January 23 lockdown of 50 million people averted an additional 7,00,000 cases outside Wuhan, interventions one week and three weeks earlier may have brought down the number by 66% and 95%, respectively. In an interview, Dali Yang, Professor of political science at the University of Chicago and a leading expert on China's political system, explains how the epidemic slipped through the many layers of China's system during those 21 days. Edited excerpts:*

**We now know by end-December, many doctors in Wuhan were aware of a serious outbreak which some suspected was contagious, and by December 31, they had alerted the Wuhan Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). What should have happened next?**

■ First, we should understand the structure of the system. Every province, city and even district has its own CDC, but these are subordinate to the health commission at every level so they do not directly report to the national level. They belong to the municipal or provincial health administrations. The Wuhan CDC's December 31 statement [saying no proof of human-to-human transmission] was clearly a massive error. The biggest error, however, was the crackdown from that day telling doctors they could not speak about what was happening. It appears from the start, everything was done to downplay the severity of the situation rather than say, let's err on the side of caution in terms of the contagiousness.

**At what level would the decision have been made to play it down?**

■ The [national] CDC people suspected something was much worse and reported it to the WHO the same day through the National Health Commission, which was the right protocol. They also shared the genetic sequence with the world relatively soon [by January 12]. But at the same time in Wuhan, consistently for so many days, they were saying this is not a serious issue. There were zero cases reported all the way until January 16. The Wuhan municipal leadership instituted the new criteria to keep the numbers down.

**How relevant was the fact that Wuhan was hosting its annual Party Congress sessions from January 6 to 17?**

■ This was crucially important. This system has gotten used to the idea that you cannot allow anything to up-



**○ If China had acted earlier, say by January 7, it may have been an entirely different equation**

set the political atmosphere during those times.

**What would have been the role of the national leadership in this time?**

■ We know the national authorities sent a team to Wuhan on December 31, which stayed for several days. I think they have emphasised the local authorities are the primary unit of responsibility, so they claim they deferred to the provincial leadership. There is also an issue in terms of ranking. Even if you send the Health Minister, he cannot simply order the provincial leader. The nature of the Chinese system is you tend to have shirking of responsibility, but when things get big, it's capable of decisive action, as in this case they did by locking down a city with 9 million people. That's not a decision that most other countries could have taken, which is why the Chinese are actually congratulating themselves, but the problem

is by the time they locked it down 5 million people had left.

**Does the fact that President Xi went to Myanmar on January 17 and 18 tell us something about how aware Beijing was?**

■ Until the middle of January, there were eminent people in the public health community who were looking at zero new cases being reported and thinking that with another wave of zero cases, we would be done! I do think people fell for what was being reported out of Wuhan.

**China's CDC has internationally respected scientists. What explains why they were unable to react earlier?**

■ When China did respond nationally [after January 20], they were able to get a lot of people who deal with SARS involved and that mattered hugely in their response. Only it was too late for the world. If they had acted earlier, say by January 7, it may have been an entirely different equation. The most important lesson is there has to be more transparency and an open environment for sharing and discussion. It was remarkable how you saw doctors were cowed into not speaking. It became almost like a group-think situation where even when everyone saw it was contagious, yet there was no public airing. No one was willing to shout this was contagious, we have to take action in Wuhan. And that, to me, is just tragic.

# ‘No foreign-backed terror in Afghanistan’

Taliban says it's fighting occupation, asks India to take care of its Muslim minority

KALLOL BHATTACHERJEE NEW DELHI

Externally supported terrorism does not exist in Afghanistan, the Taliban said on Wednesday and urged India to ensure welfare of its Muslim community. Spokesman of the Taliban's Political Office, Suhail Shaheen, said the main problem of Afghanistan is foreign occupation and suggested India should not be at “loggerheads” with real Afghan aspirations.

“There is no externally sponsored terrorism. There are, on the one side, the Afghan people, a liberation force in the shape of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA), struggling for liberation of the country. On the other side, there are the invading forces. It is more appropriate for India, whose people also have a shining history of struggle from Britain, not to give the name of terrorism to indigenous liberation movements,” said Mr. Shaheen in an online interaction with *The Hindu*. Following the February 29 peace agreement with the U.S., the Taliban has been re-



Taliban spokesman Suhail Shaheen

ferring to itself as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

Taliban's pronouncements on a set of long held Indian positions came a day after the Ministry of External Affairs reiterated and hinted at Pakistan's hand in fomenting terrorism inside Afghanistan and approved the choice of the team from the side of President Ashraf Ghani's government for the intra-Afghan negotiation.

“India has consistently supported an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled process for enduring peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan... which

**○ We are committed to minorities' rights and have condemned the attack on a Sikh temple**

would lead to a peaceful and stable future for Afghanistan free from the scourge of externally sponsored terrorism,” the Ministry of External Affairs said on April 1.

### New starting point

The Taliban, however, clarified that it disavows with some points in the Indian statement especially with the notion of “Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled peace process” that India has supported since the 1980s.

“There are sentences in this statement, we do not agree with. Afghan-led and Afghan-owned which in your opinion means Kabul administration-led and owned. On the basis of the agreement signed with the U.S., we talk to all Afghan sides and will hold intra-Afghan negotiations. In principle, they (talks) are not led or

owned by Kabul,” said Mr. Shaheen.

Mr. Shaheen pointed out that the new starting point of the intra-Afghan peace talk is the U.S.-Taliban peace agreement. “I think it is neither in India's interest to remain at loggerheads with the genuine aspirations of Afghan people.”

The comments from the Taliban came after at least 25 persons, mostly Sikh citizens of Afghanistan including an Indian, were killed in a terror attack in Kabul on March 25 which was claimed by the Islamic State.

Mr. Shaheen said the Afghan Taliban disapproves of such attacks and will protect all communities of Afghanistan and urged the government of India to treat the Indian Muslim community without discrimination. “We are committed to minorities' rights and have strongly condemned the recent attack by Daesh (IS) on a Sikh minority temple. We also urge India to protect the rights of its Muslim minority. They are Indian citizens and your people.”

# Trump resists national shutdown

ASSOCIATED PRESS WASHINGTON

President Donald Trump is resisting calls to issue a national stay-at-home order to stem the spread of the new coronavirus despite his administration's projections that tens of thousands of Americans are likely to be killed by the disease. One by one, though, States are increasingly pushing shutdown orders of their own.

Mr. Trump said on Wednesday he wants to give Governors’ “flexibility” on whether a stay-at-home policy is the best option for their constituents but acknowledged that he's looking at limiting air and rail travel between hot spots within the U.S. “There are some states that are different,” he said. “There are some states that don't have much of a problem.”

Surgeon General Jerome Adams said the nation's federalist system leaves much of the authority on how to properly respond to catastrophes to State governors and local officials.

# Wealthy, young, educated more likely to use Net during lockdown

In India, 57% of 18-29 year-olds use the Net or a smartphone

SRIRAM LAKSHMAN CHENNAI

Those who are wealthier, younger, and more educated are likely to stay more connected during the pandemic as countries institute various degrees of lockdown, new analysis released by the Pew Research Centre suggest.

The results are particularly significant as Internet and smartphone usage is more important than ever now. Surprisingly, India is an outlier compared to other emerging economies for its low proportion of Internet usage/smartphone ownership — 38% relative to, say, Kenya (48%) and Lebanon (89%). China and the countries in India's South Asian neighbourhood are not included in the list of 34 surveyed countries.

In more than 32 of the surveyed countries, at least half the population reported using the Internet occasionally or owning a smartphone. South Korea had the highest percentage of Internet users

at 98%, while eight in 10 in Italy had access.

### Age divide

Unsurprisingly, younger people in all 34 countries reported greater Internet usage than older people. Indonesia showed the biggest age-wise variation, with 89% of 18-29 year-olds reporting Internet usage or smartphone ownership compared to 24% of 50+ year-olds. Disparities are greater in emerging economies. For many countries, the differences in usage are negligible, if existent, between the 30-49 age group and the 18-29 age group. In India, 57% of 18-29 year-olds use the Internet or a smartphone compared to just 18% of 50+ year-olds.

Twenty-three percent of those with ‘lower education’ used the Internet in India compared to 69% of those with ‘higher education’. In Israel, Canada, the U.K., Australia, Sweden, the Netherlands and South Korea,

the difference in usage between the two demographics was less than 10%.

Across the set of 34 countries, those with incomes higher than the national median are more likely to report that they use the Internet than those with incomes below the median. For India these numbers are 51% and 27% respectively. There is a less than 10 point difference between the two income groups in only Australia, Spain, the Netherlands and South Korea.

### Phone ownership

In India, 32% reported owning any mobile phone, 35% reported owning a mobile phone that isn't a smartphone, while 32% reported owning a smartphone. South Korea had 100% mobile phone penetration, with 97% saying they owned a smartphone. The extent of smartphone ownership in a country is positively correlated with higher GDP per capita as per the data.

## ELSEWHERE



**Jazz great Ellis Marsalis passes away aged 85**

Jazz great Ellis Marsalis died on Wednesday at the age of 85 after contracting the coronavirus, his son Branford said. The acclaimed American pianist and teacher — who featured on dozens of records over a musical career spanning several decades — was the father of trumpeter Wynton and saxophonist Branford. Born in New Orleans — the epicenter of the jazz world — in November 1934, Mr. Ellis recorded with heavyweights such as Cannonball and Nat Adderley, Marcus Roberts and Courtney Pine. Mr. Ellis was inducted into The Louisiana Music Hall of Fame in 2018. AFP

# Amid virus threat, Biden sidelined by omnipresent Trump

The Democratic frontrunner is struggling for attention as the President dominates the airwaves

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE WASHINGTON

One month on from historically reclaiming Democratic presidential frontrunner status, Joe Biden is in physical and political isolation, basement-bound and largely unheard as Donald Trump commands Americans' attention with his coronavirus response.

It has been an awkward sidelining of an extraordinary comeback story.

After nearly self-implosion in the first three state contests in February, former Vice-President Biden turned his campaign around, winning the lion's share of the next 25 primaries to become the presumptive nominee over his rival Bernie Sanders.

Suddenly, Mr. Biden is struggling for attention during what would normally be

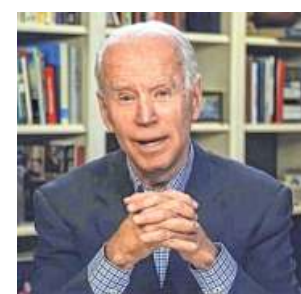
a critical, high-profile point in a campaign.

In a situation unheard of in modern American politics, several States have postponed their primaries, mass rallies are paused and all in-person campaigning has ground to a halt.

Coronavirus is the inescapable news headline, and the President's megaphone during this ongoing tragedy is impossible to eclipse.

“Crises are fundamentally presidential moments, and given that, Biden just doesn't have the capacity to truly break in,” Josh Pacek, a University of Michigan Professor and expert on political communication, told AFP by phone about the campaign ahead.

Mr. Trump, of course, is taking full advantage. Daily White House brief-



Joe Biden

ings with him and his coronavirus task force now often roll past 90 minutes, with Mr. Trump spending significant chunks of time on his personal and administrative achievements.

### Basement broadcast

Mr. Biden, by contrast, is broadcasting from his basement, clamouring for air time even while acknowledging he is a former insider

with no knowledge of current operations or access to internal administration reports. He accuses Mr. Trump of being “very slow to act” and downplaying the gravity of the crisis for weeks.

U.S. networks are giving Mr. Biden, 77, some exposure, and he strives to present himself as a leader with greater presidential bearing than Mr. Trump.

But even if Wisconsin defies mounting criticism and holds its primary on April 7 as scheduled, Mr. Biden would be deprived of his greatest political assets: his warm, empathetic manner and a blue-collar “here's-the-deal” delivery during face-to-face contact with voters.

“It doesn't worry me,” Mr. Biden told CNN on Tuesday about the campaign moving online. “I'm sitting in my

basement, there's a television studio set up down here,” he said. “That's just going to have to do.”

Mr. Trump, meanwhile, has dominated the airwaves. His job approval rating, underwater for years, has ticked up in the past 10 days, a common phenomenon for U.S. Presidents in the grips of a crisis.

But Mr. Pacek said the “rally ‘round the flag effect’” for Mr. Trump will be fleeting. He pointed to George Bush's job approval skyrocketing to 89% in early 1991 during the Gulf War. The Republican lost re-election 20 months later. By comparison, Mr. Trump's approval climbing only past 50% during an all-hands-on-deck emergency “portends somewhat poorly” for the President.

# Iran, U.S. heat up war of words despite pandemic

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE TEHRAN

Iran said on Thursday it “only acts in self-defence” after President Donald Trump warned it against attacks on U.S. troops in Iraq, as a new war of words heated up despite the pandemic.

Tensions between the arch-foes flared in Iraq where the U.S. deployed Patriot air defence missiles, prompting Iran to demand a withdrawal.

Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif tweeted that “unlike the U.S. — which surreptitiously lies, cheats & assassinates — Iran only acts in self-defence”.

“Don't be misled by usual warmongers, AGAIN,” he said, addressing Mr. Trump. “Iran starts no wars but teaches lessons to those who do,” he added.



Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif

Mr. Trump warned Iran on Wednesday that it would pay a “heavy price” in the event of further attacks on U.S. troops. He tweeted that “upon information and belief, Iran or its proxies are planning a sneak attack on U.S. troops and/or assets in Iraq”.

In response, Mr. Zarif tweeted that “Iran has FRIENDS: No one can have MILLIONS of ‘proxies’”