

# Americans told to wear face masks

Trump says it is voluntary; Europe sees glimmer of hope as new infections slow in Spain and Italy

**AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
MADRID**  
Americans on Saturday came to grips with recommendations to wear masks against the coronavirus, while Spain added to hopes that Europe could be turning a corner in the pandemic with a second daily drop in deaths. Since COVID-19 emerged late last year, more than 1.1 million people have fallen ill. More than 60,000 people have died. Europe accounts for the lion's share of virus fatalities, but America logged another rise in its death toll to bring the total to just over 7,100.

On Saturday, New York State's toll rose at a devastating pace to 3,565 deaths, Governor Andrew Cuomo said, up from 2,935 the previous day, the largest 24-hour jump recorded there. President Donald Trump's administration on Friday suggested widespread use of simple masks or scarves might help slow the spread — even if the U.S. leader said he himself wouldn't be following the advice.

"It's going to be really a voluntary thing," Mr. Trump said. "You don't have to do it and I'm choosing not to do it, but some people may want to do it and that's okay." Anthony Fauci, head of infectious diseases at the National Institutes of Health, cited "recent information that the virus can actually be spread even when people just speak as opposed to coughing and sneezing".

The World Health Organization has been more cautious, saying the airborne threat was only known to occur during certain medical treatments. The U.S. recommendation will likely worsen an already severe shortage of masks in the U.S. and Europe, which both rely heavily

on imports from China. Officials in New York, the worst affected part of the U.S., began advising people to wear masks some days ago, and there were signs on the streets that the advice was being heeded.

**Hope in Europe**  
In Europe, Italy and Spain continue to bear the brunt of a pandemic that has kept millions of citizens confined to their homes, closed schools and businesses and overwhelmed healthcare systems. But official figures suggested unprecedented measures to restrict people's movements were working and that the peak may have hit on the continent.

Spain, which is under a near-total lockdown, on Saturday recorded a second successive daily fall in coronavirus-related deaths with 809 fatalities. The total number of deaths in the country now stands at 11,744, second only to Italy. The number of new Spanish cases also slowed at 7,026, taking the total to 1,24,736.

Italy reported late on Friday that the daily rise of officially registered infections dropped to a new low of just 4%, while the number of people who had fully recovered was rising.

In Germany, where the death toll rose again on Saturday, Chancellor Angela Merkel said figures showing the virus's spread was slowing "give us a little bit of hope". "But it is definitely much too early to see a clear trend in that, and it is certainly too early to think in any way about relaxing the strict rules we have given ourselves," she said. German authorities joined the U.S. and other countries in encouraging citizens to wear self-made masks in public.



**Testing children too:** Healthcare workers collecting blood samples from a child to detect the SARS-CoV-2 virus, in Antananarivo, Madagascar, on Saturday. • AFP

## U.S. to cover treatment of uninsured people

**AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
WASHINGTON**  
The tens of millions of Americans who lack health insurance will be covered by the government if they fall sick with the COVID-19 illness, the U.S. Health Secretary said on Friday.

Alex Azar told reporters that the CARES act, a coronavirus stimulus package passed by Congress, included \$100 billion for health care providers who "will be forbidden from balance billing the uninsured for the cost of their care."

Instead, hospitals and healthcare professionals will be reimbursed at the rates for Medicare, a state insurance programme for the elderly.

Mr. Azar added that people who have recently lost

their jobs and thus their insurance would be eligible for a special enrollment period under healthcare exchanges created by the Affordable Care Act. President Donald Trump has spent most of his tenure trying to undo the law, also known as Obamacare, and the marketplaces created under it.

The latest official figures showed there were 27.5 million people without health insurance — but the current number is likely far higher after 10 million people filed unemployment claims in the past two weeks.

Public health experts have repeatedly warned that the uninsured may be reluctant to seek treatment, placing themselves at greater risk and fuelling the spread of the disease.

## U.K. death toll records daily high of 708

**AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
LONDON**

Britain on Saturday reported 708 more deaths from COVID-19 in a new daily high, as the number of confirmed cases rose to nearly 42,000. The Health Ministry said 4,313 people who tested positive for the virus in hospital had died as of 1600 GMT Friday while there were 41,903 confirmed cases as of 0800 GMT Saturday, up 3,735.

The toll has been steadily increasing at more than over 500 deaths a day this week and the country is bracing for an expected peak in the next week to 10 days. Prime Minister Boris Johnson ordered a three-week lockdown on March 23 to try to cut infections.

# China pauses in memory of virus victims and 'martyrs'

In Wuhan, sirens sounded as people fall silent in the streets

**AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
WUHAN**

China came to a standstill on Saturday to mourn patients and medical staff killed by the coronavirus, as the world's most populous country observed a nationwide three-minute silence.

At 10 a.m. local time, citizens paused, cars, trains and ships sounded their horns, and air-raid sirens rang out in memory of the more than 3,000 lives claimed by the virus in China. In Wuhan — the city where the virus first emerged late last year — sirens and horns sounded as people fell silent in the streets.

Tongji Hospital staff stood outside with heads bowed towards the main building, some in the protective hazmat suits that have become a symbol of the crisis worldwide. "I feel a lot of sorrow about our colleagues and patients who died," Xu, a nurse at Tongji who worked on the frontlines treating COVID-19 patients, said, holding back tears. "I hope they can rest well in heaven."

Workers in protective wear paused silently beside barriers at one residential community — a reminder there are still tight restrictions on everyday life across Wuhan. State media showed Chinese President Xi Jinping and other officials standing outside a Beijing government compound, wearing white flowers. National flags were lowered to half-mast across the country, including in the capital's Tiananmen Square.

Pedestrians in a busy shopping district stopped and kept their heads low in silent tribute, while police stood with their riot shields



**In a mood for reflection:** People paying tribute to those who died of the COVID-19 disease in Beijing on Saturday. • REUTERS

down and bowed heads. "During this process, a lot of people including the medical workers... have made extraordinary contributions. They are all heroes," said shopper Wang Yongna.

Park-goers paused their activities too, some with hands together in prayer. Trains on Beijing's subway network halted, and passengers stood silently in a mark of respect.

**Mourning the 'martyrs'**  
Officials said the observance was a chance to mourn virus "martyrs" — an honorific title the government bestowed this week on 14 medical workers who died fighting the outbreak.

The hashtag "China remembers its heroes" had nearly 1.3 billion views on Twitter-like Weibo Saturday.

The martyrs include doctor Li Wenliang, a Wuhan whistleblower reprimanded by authorities for trying to warn others in the early days of the contagion. Mr. Li's death from COVID-19 in February prompted a national outpouring of grief and anger at the government's handling of the crisis. The ruling Communist Party has

sought to direct criticism to local authorities in Wuhan and surrounding Hubei province, who were accused of downplaying the severity of the virus. Despite drastic measures to lock down the province in January, the epidemic spiralled into a global pandemic. Some restrictions in Hubei were eased in recent weeks after the official stated number of new infections dropped to near zero. Saturday's commemoration coincided with the annual Qing Ming holiday — the "tomb sweeping" festival — when Chinese people visit the graves of relatives and leave offerings in remembrance. Some restrictions were tightened again this week to prevent a second wave of infections, with authorities discouraging cemetery visits to mark the festival. Last year, nearly 10 million people visited cemeteries across the three-day holiday, according to state news agency Xinhua.

At Beijing's enormous Babaoshan cemetery, mourners made online reservations to visit graves in a limited number of time slots, with only three relatives allowed per tomb.

# Trump fires top intelligence official

Inspector General Atkinson had played a key role in his impeachment

**ASSOCIATED PRESS  
WASHINGTON**

U.S. President Donald Trump on Friday abruptly fired the Inspector General of the intelligence community, sidelining an independent watchdog who played a pivotal role in his impeachment. Mr. Trump informed the Senate intelligence committee late on Friday of his decision to fire Michael Atkinson, according to a letter. Mr. Atkinson handled the whistleblower complaint that triggered Mr. Trump's impeachment last year.

Mr. Atkinson's firing, which is part of a shake-up of the intelligence community under Mr. Trump, thrusts the President's impeachment back into the spotlight as his administration deals with the deadly spread of the virus.

**'No confidence'**  
Mr. Trump said in the letter that it is "vital" that he has confidence in the appointees serving as Inspectors General, and "that is no longer the

case with regard to this Inspector General."

Mr. Atkinson was the first to inform Congress about an anonymous whistleblower complaint last year that described Mr. Trump's pressure on Ukraine to investigate Democrat Joe Biden and his son. That complaint prompted a House investigation that ultimately resulted in Mr. Trump's impeachment. In letters to lawmakers in August and September, Mr. Atkinson said he believed the complaint was "urgent" and "credible." But the acting Director of National Intelligence at the time, Joseph Maguire, said he did not believe it met the definition of "urgent," and tried to withhold the complaint from Congress.

The complaint was eventually released after a firestorm, and it revealed that Mr. Trump had asked Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy in a July call to investigate Democrats. The House launched an inquiry in September, and three



Michael Atkinson. • AFP

months later voted to impeach Mr. Trump. The Republican-led Senate acquitted Mr. Trump in February.

Mr. Trump said in the letter to the Senate that Mr. Atkinson would be removed from office in 30 days, the required amount of time he must wait after informing Congress. He wrote that he would nominate an individual "who has my full confidence" at a later date.

According to two congressional officials, Mr. Atkinson has been placed on administrative leave, meaning he will not serve out the 30

days. One of the officials said Mr. Atkinson was only informed of his removal on Friday night.

Tom Monheim, a career intelligence professional, will become the acting Inspector General for the intelligence community, according to an intelligence official. Mr. Monheim is currently the general counsel of the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency.

**Larger shake-up**  
Mr. Atkinson's firing is part of a larger shake-up in the intelligence community. Mr. Maguire, the former acting Director of National Intelligence, was also removed by Mr. Trump and replaced by a Trump loyalist, Richard Grenell.

The intelligence community, which Mr. Trump has always viewed with skepticism, has been in turmoil amid the constant turnover. Mr. Atkinson is at least the seventh intelligence official to be fired, ousted or moved aside since last summer.

# Pro-European Keir Starmer elected U.K. Labour leader

He vows to reunite party, end rift between leftists & centrists

**AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
LONDON**

Pro-European centrist Keir Starmer was on Saturday unveiled as the new Labour party leader, heralding a shift in Britain's main Opposition party after a crushing election defeat under veteran socialist Jeremy Corbyn and years of ideological infighting.

The 57-year-old former Chief State Prosecutor defeated Corbyn loyalist Rebecca Long-Bailey and backbencher Lisa Nandy in a lengthy campaign sparked by Mr. Corbyn's resignation after December's loss at the polls to Boris Johnson's Conservatives.

Angela Rayner becomes the new deputy leader, Labour announced on Twitter, after it was forced to cancel a special conference because of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Mr. Starmer, who was Labour's Brexit spokesman,



Keir Starmer. • AFP

called his election "the honour and privilege" of his life and vowed to "engage constructively" with Mr. Johnson's Conservative government.

**Constructive work**  
Mr. Johnson immediately offered his congratulations and the pair spoke, with Mr. Starmer accepting an invita-

tion to a government briefing on COVID-19 next week. "Keir offered to work constructively with the government on how best to respond to the coronavirus outbreak," his spokesman said.

Mr. Starmer himself vowed to reunite Labour, after deep rifts between supporters of socialist Mr. Corbyn's left ideals and centrists, and wrangling over its Brexit strategy.

He immediately addressed the issue of anti-Semitism that Mr. Corbyn was accused of failing to tackle, which tarnished the party's reputation and caused Jewish members to leave in droves.

"Anti-Semitism has been a stain on our party. I have seen the grief that it's brought to so many Jewish communities," Starmer said. "On behalf of the Labour Party, I am sorry."

# Biden to begin process of selecting running mate

He has committed to choosing a woman

**ASSOCIATED PRESS  
WASHINGTON**

Joe Biden said on Friday that he will announce a committee to oversee his vice-presidential selection process and is already thinking about whom he'd choose to join his Cabinet.



Joe Biden. • NYT

Mr. Biden, who holds a lead in delegates over Sen. Bernie Sanders but has yet to officially clinch the nomination, also said he's spoken to Mr. Sanders to let him know he'd be proceeding with the vetting process. Mr. Biden has previously committed to choosing a woman as his running mate. Mr. Biden's comments came in response to a question during a virtual fundraiser

about whether he'd be willing to release his full proposed Cabinet at the same time he announces his vice-presidential pick. Mr. Biden didn't answer the question directly, but did indicate that there are a number of people who have been helping his campaign with whom he's discussed whether they'd be "willing to come into a government if I get elected."

# Kabul gurdwara attack 'mastermind' arrested

Afghan Special Forces detained ISKP chief Mawlawi Aslam Farooqi in a 'complex operation'

**VIJAJITA SINGH  
NEW DELHI**

Afghanistan's Special Forces on Saturday arrested Mawlawi Aslam Farooqi, a Pakistani national and the emir (chief) of the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP), the group that claimed the March 25 attack on a gurdwara in Kabul that killed 27 people, including an Indian.

Confirming the arrest, an Afghanistan official said on Saturday that the ISKP has strong links with "regional intelligence agencies", hinting at a Pakistani hand in the terror group's operation.

Javid Faisal, the spokesperson of the Office of the National Security Council in Afghanistan, said on Twitter, "ISKP leader Abdullah Orakzai, a Pakistani national

known as Aslam Farooqi, was detained in a complex operation by @NDSAAfghanistan special forces. In initial investigations, he has confessed of strong relationship between the Islamic State-Khorasan and regional intelligence agencies."

Senior government officials in India maintain that the ISKP is run by Pakistan's Inter-State Intelligence (ISI) and the arrest of Farooqi establishes it.

**ISI link**  
"Farooqi was a small time militant commander who was active in Pakistan's Khyber area. His rise in the ISKP leadership was made possible by the ISI," said an official. Another official said that Farooqi was earlier as-



Mawlawi Aslam Farooqi

sociated with Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT).

The gurdwara attack in Kabul was executed by a 29-year-old man from Kerala's Kasargod — Muhammed Muhsin. He stormed into the

gurdwara along with two others. As reported earlier, there are indications that another Indian — Sajid Kuthirummal, a shopkeeper from Kasargod who was among a group of 21 people who left India in 2016 to join the ISKP — could also have been part of the terror plot.

Mushin was killed in the encounter and the whereabouts of Sajid are not known yet.

A July 25, 2019 report published by a UN monitoring team said that Farooqi had replaced ISIL-Khorasan leader Mawlawi Zia ul-Haq in April the same year, referring to another acronym of the IS.

"In April, ISIL-K leader Mawlawi Zia ul-Haq, also known as Abu Omar Khorasani, was dismissed and replaced by Mawlawi Aslam Farooqi, who was previously in charge of operations in the Khyber Agency. Ul-Haq's demotion was reportedly due to poor performance in the context of ISIL-K setbacks in Nangarhar in the second half of 2018. The new leadership nomination was made during a visit by an ISIL core delegation, underscoring the direct relationship between ISIL-K and the ISIL core in Iraq and Syria," the report said.

There are other reports which said the leadership changed in 2018 after differences between Pashtun fighters led by Farooqi and ul-Haq's group comprising fighters from Central Asian countries.

## ELSEWHERE



### Morrison seeks action against wet markets

**MELBOURNE**  
Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison on Friday urged the World Health Organization and the United Nations to act against China's wet markets, like the one where the deadly coronavirus is thought to have originated, as they pose "great risks" to the health and well-being of the rest of the world. • PTI

### South Korea to extend social distancing period

**SEOUL**  
South Korea said on Saturday that it will extend its intensive social distancing campaign scheduled to end on Monday by two weeks in a bid to curb the rate of virus infections to around 50 a day. This week, the government has been gauging whether it should extend a 15-day intensive social distancing policy it implemented on March 21. • REUTERS

### 1 killed, 4 injured in Russia gas explosion

**MOSCOW**  
One person was killed and four were injured when a gas explosion ripped through a five-storey residential building outside Moscow on Saturday, authorities said. The blast took place in the town of Orekhovo-Zuyevo during stay-at-home orders from authorities trying to slow the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. • AFP

### 2 killed in knife attack in French town

**LYON**  
A man armed with a knife attacked people out shopping in the southeastern French town of Romans-sur-Isere on Saturday, killing two and wounding four, the Mayor said. The attacks took place in the morning outside a bakery, and at shops in the town centre, said Mayor Marie-Helene Thoraval, who said the assailant had been arrested. • REUTERS