

U.S. braces itself for 'toughest virus week'

President Trump warns of increase in deaths but says that the shutdown cannot continue forever

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
WASHINGTON

U.S. President Donald Trump warned Americans to brace for a "very horrendous" number of COVID-19 deaths in the coming days, ahead of a rare speech by Queen Elizabeth II on Sunday aimed at rallying hard-hit Britain.

Global deaths from the COVID-19 pandemic have soared past 60,000, with Europe continuing to bear the brunt of the virus which has left roughly half the planet confined at home. There are now more than 1.2 million confirmed cases across the globe, and around 65,000 people have died since the virus first emerged in China late last year, according to a Johns Hopkins University tally. Mr. Trump said the U.S. was entering "a time that's going to be very horrendous. This will probably be the toughest week," he said. "There will be a lot of death."

At the same time, the President stressed the U.S. —



Keeping the patient stable: A medical worker holding an oxygen mask over the mouth and nose of a patient suspected to be suffering from COVID-19 in Paris last week. ■AFP

thank healthcare workers. "I hope in the years to come everyone will be able to take pride in how they responded to this challenge," she will say, according to extracts released on Saturday.

Some relief in Europe

There was, however, some encouraging news from Europe over the weekend.

Worst-hit Italy cheered after seeing its number of intensive care virus cases drop for the first time — from 4,068 on Friday to 3,994 on Saturday. "This is a very important data point," said civil protection service chief Angelo Borrelli, adding that it "allows our hospitals to breathe." Spain, which is under a near-total lockdown, saw a second successive daily fall in coronavirus-related deaths with 809 fatalities.

New York State saw a record 630 deaths in a single day and Governor Andrew Cuomo warned the worst was yet to come. New York City appealed for licensed medical personnel to volunteer their services.

Mainland China sees an increase in infections

REUTERS
BEIJING

Mainland China reported 30 new COVID-19 cases on Saturday, up from 19 a day earlier as the number of cases involving travellers from abroad as well as local transmissions increased, highlighting the difficulty in stamping out the outbreak.

The National Health Commission said in a statement on Sunday that 25 of the latest cases involved people who had entered from abroad, compared with 18 such cases a day earlier. Five new locally transmitted infections were also reported on Saturday, all in the southern coastal province of Guangdong, up from a day earlier.

The mainland has now reported a total of 81,669 cases, while the death toll has risen by three to 3,329.

Though daily infections have fallen dramatically from the height of the epidemic in February, Beijing remains unable to completely halt new infections despite imposing some of the most drastic measures to curb the virus's spread. The so-called imported cases and asymptomatic patients, who have the virus and can give it to others but show no symptoms, have become among China's chief concerns in recent weeks.

The country has closed off its borders to almost all foreigners as the virus spread globally, though most of the imported cases involve Chinese nationals returning from overseas. The Central government also has pushed local authorities to identify and isolate the asymptomatic patients.

Highest daily rise in Tokyo

REUTERS
TOKYO

Some 143 more cases of the SARS-CoV-2 virus have been reported in Tokyo, the city's Governor said on Sunday, with the highest daily jump bringing the number of cases in the Japanese capital to more than 1,000.

The number of cases with untraceable transmission routes had increased in recent days, Governor Yuriko Koike said in a livecast YouTube video on Sunday, adding it was worrying that there were a number of people who were infected at hospitals.

Singapore sees 120 new cases

REUTERS
SINGAPORE

Singapore reported 120 new SARS-CoV-2 cases on Sunday, by far its highest daily rise, and quarantined nearly 20,000 migrant workers in their dormitories.

Of Sunday's new cases, 116 were locally transmitted and many were linked to two dormitories that house migrant workers, who will now have to stay in their rooms for 14 days.

The number of new cases is a 60% increase over the 75 reported on Saturday, which was the previous biggest daily rise. Singapore has reported a total of 1,309 infections and six deaths from the virus.

Pope Francis opens Holy Week, says now is the time to serve

'May we reach out to those suffering and those in need'

REUTERS
VATICAN CITY

Pope Francis marked a surreal Palm Sunday in an empty St. Peter's Basilica, urging people living through the COVID-19 pandemic not to be so concerned with what they lack but how they can ease the suffering of others.

The service, kicking off Holy Week events leading to Easter, usually attracts tens of thousands of people to a St. Peter's Square bedecked with olive and palm trees.

This time, it was held from a secondary altar behind the main one. Pope Francis normally uses and attended by only about two dozen people, including a few aides, nuns and a scaled-down choir, all practising social distancing. The symbolic procession was only several metres long and a few potted olive trees were brought in.

The mass was broadcast on television and over the



Pope Francis observing Palm Sunday Mass at the Vatican on Sunday. ■AP

Internet to many millions. Cutting a solitary figure, Pope Francis listened as three priests read the gospel account of Jesus's entry into Jerusalem and being hailed as the messiah.

Tragedy of pandemic

In his sermon, Pope Francis urged his listeners to turn to God "in the tragedy of a pandemic, in the face of the many false securities that have now crumbled, in the face of so many hopes betrayed, in the sense of abandonment

that weighs upon our hearts". The pandemic could help transform fear into service, he said. The Vatican has been in its own lockdown, mostly mirroring that in Italy. The Pope and his closest aides have tested negative.

"The tragedy we are experiencing summons us to take seriously the things that are serious, and not to be caught up in those that matter less; to rediscover that life is of no use if not used to serve others. For life is measured by love," Pope Francis said. "May we reach out to those who are suffering and those most in need. May we not be concerned about what we lack, but what good we can do for others," he said.

All of the Pope's Holy Week services, which normally draw tens of thousands of pilgrims and tourists to Rome, will take place in the empty basilica in a scaled-down version.

Over 300 Tablighi Jamaat members test positive in Pakistan's Punjab

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
LAHORE

Over 300 Tablighi Jamaat members have been tested positive for the SARS-CoV-2 virus till Sunday in Pakistan's Punjab province, amid efforts by authorities to track down and quarantine thousands of people who attended a massive congregation of the group last month. Authorities have placed the entire city of Raiwind that houses headquarters of the Pakistani faction of the Jamaat under

According to the data released by the primary and secondary healthcare monitoring room on Sunday, over 300 preachers of the Tablighi Jamaat in different parts of Punjab province have so far been tested positive. Most of them belong to Lahore's Tablighi Jamaat Markaz that has been turned into quarantine centre.

A large number of preachers who had attended a major congregation in early March in its headquarters in

Lahore were later tracked down across the country and placed in quarantine centres.

According to the government, in March the Tablighi Jamaat went ahead with its annual congregation in Raiwind, Lahore against its 'advice' that the gathering might spread the virus.

Pakistani authorities had urged the cancellation of the five-day Tablighi congregation, which was attended by thousands of people from several countries.

Planned U.S. aid cut will hit Afghan security forces: experts

The reduction came amidst the Ghani-Abdullah feud

REUTERS
WASHINGTON

A planned \$1 billion cut in U.S. aid to Afghanistan would come from funds for Afghan security forces, according to three U.S. sources, a step experts said would undercut both Kabul's ability to fight the Taliban and its leverage to negotiate a peace deal with them.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced the reduction on March 23 and threatened to slash the same amount next year to try to force Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and his political rival Abdullah Abdullah to end a feud that has stalled U.S.-led peace-making efforts in Afghanistan.

Two U.S. congressional aides said State Department officials told Congress the \$1 billion would come from a



A wall-painting in Kabul symbolising the Afghan peace process. ■AFP

\$4.2 billion Pentagon fund that underwrites about three quarters of the Afghan security forces' annual budget. "The idea they would cut security forces funding goes against U.S. national security interests," said one aide, arguing the money is needed to maintain the U.S.-backed government's ability to fight the Taliban while

preserving its bargaining power in peace talks.

Congress appropriated at least \$86.4 billion for Afghan security assistance between fiscal years 2002 and 2019, according to a March 11 Congressional Research Service report. "That's the only fund large enough to support a \$1 billion cut," said the third source, a former U.S. military official.

The former U.S. military official said the proposed cut reflects U.S. President Donald Trump's determination to bring U.S. forces home from the longest conflict in American history. Asked what \$1 billion U.S. aid cuts this year and next would do to Afghan security forces' ability to fight the Taliban, he replied: "They will be toast."

3.86 billion masks exported since March: China

Statement comes amidst quality concerns expressed by many countries

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BEIJING

China has sold nearly four billion masks to foreign countries since March, officials said on Sunday, as they tried to stem widespread fears over the quality of medical exports. Despite Chinese cases dwindling, Beijing has encouraged factories to increase production of medical supplies as parts of the world face a protective equipment shortage.

China has exported 3.86 billion pieces of protective clothing, 16,000 ventilators and 2.84 million COVID-19 testing kits since March 1, customs official Jin Hai said, with orders to more than 50 countries. She added the country's medical supply exports were valued at 10.2 billion yuan (\$1.4 billion). However numerous nations — including the Netherlands, the Philippines, Croatia, Turkey



A masked affair: A Palestinian newly-wed couple in Hebron, West Bank. ■AFP

and Spain — have complained about substandard or faulty medical products shipped from China.

Recall of orders

Last week, the Dutch government recalled 6,000,000 masks out of a Chinese shipment of 1.3 million that did not meet quality standards. China said the manufacturer "stated clearly that (the

na having different standards and different usage habits to other countries. Even improper use can lead to doubts over quality," said Jiang Fan, an official with the Ministry of Commerce.

The comments echoed remarks from Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying, who over the past week has repeatedly urged Western media not to "politicise" or "hype up" the issue.

Tighter regulations

Earlier this week, Beijing tightened regulations for exported virus medical equipment, requiring products to fulfil both domestic licensing standards and that of their destination countries.

China has also increased its production capacity of COVID-19 testing kits to over 4 million a day, said Zhang Qi, an official with the National Medical Products Administration.

The mystery of low German COVID-19 fatality rates

Early, aggressive testing, well-equipped ICUs, and faith in the government resulted in a remarkably low death count

KATRIN BENNHOLD

They call them corona taxis: Medics outfitted in protective gear, driving around the empty streets of Heidelberg, Germany, to check on patients who are at home, five or six days into being sick with the SARS-CoV-2 virus. They take a blood test, looking for signs that a patient is about to go into a steep decline. They might suggest hospitalisation even to a patient who has only mild symptoms; the chances of surviving that decline are vastly improved by being in a hospital when it begins.

"There is this tipping point at the end of the first week," said professor Hans-Georg Kräusslich, head of virology at University Hospital in Heidelberg, one of the country's leading research hospitals. "If you are a person whose lungs might fail,



No magic formula: A medical employee conducting a testing demonstration in Munich, Germany, in March. ■AP

that's when you will start deteriorating."

High engagement

Dr. Heidelberg's corona taxis illustrate a level of engagement and a commitment of public resources that help explain one of the most intriguing puzzles of the pandemic: Why is Germany's death rate so low? The virus and the resulting disease,

COVID-19, have hit Germany with force: According to Johns Hopkins University, the country had more than 92,000 infections as of midday Saturday, more than any other country except the U.S., Italy and Spain. But with 1,295 deaths, Germany's fatality rate stood at 1.4% compared with 12% in Italy; around 10% in Spain, France and Britain; 4% in China; and

2.5% in the United States. "There has been talk of a German anomaly," said Hendrik Streeck, director of the Institute of Virology at the University Hospital Bonn. Dr. Streeck has been getting calls from colleagues in the United States and elsewhere. "What are you doing differently?" they ask me," he said. "Why is your death rate so low?"

There are several answers to this question, experts say — a mix of statistical distortions and very real differences in how the country has taken on the epidemic. The average age of those infected is lower in Germany than in many other countries. Many of the early patients caught the virus in Austrian and Italian ski resorts and were relatively young and healthy, Dr. Kräusslich said. The average age of contracting the disease remains relatively low,

at 49. In France, it is 62.5, and in Italy 62, according to their latest national reports. Another explanation is that Germany has been testing far more people than most nations. That means it catches more people with few or no symptoms, increasing the number of known cases but not the number of fatalities.

More ICU units

But there are also significant medical factors, epidemiologists and virologists say, chief among them early and widespread testing and treatment, plenty of intensive care beds and a trusted government whose social distancing guidelines are widely observed. In mid-January, long before most Germans had given the virus much thought, Charité hospital in Berlin had already developed a test and posted the

formula online. By the time Germany recorded its first case of COVID-19 in February, laboratories had built up a stock of test kits.

By now, Germany is conducting around 3,500,000 coronavirus tests a week, far more than any other European country. Early and widespread testing has allowed authorities to slow the spread of the pandemic by isolating known cases while they are infectious.

Further, all across Germany, hospitals have expanded their intensive care capacities. And they started from a high level. In January, Germany had some 28,000 intensive care beds equipped with ventilators, or 34 per 1,000,000 people. By comparison, that rate is 12 in Italy and 7 in the Netherlands. By now, there are 40,000 intensive care beds available in Germany. ■NY TIMES

Fired intelligence official was a disgrace: Trump

President links move to impeachment

ASSOCIATED PRESS
WASHINGTON

U.S. President Donald Trump suggested that he fired the Inspector General for the intelligence community in retaliation for impeachment, saying the official was wrong to provide an anonymous whistleblower complaint to Congress as the law requires.

Mr. Trump called Michael Atkinson a "disgrace" after informing Congress late on Friday night that he intended to fire him. In letters to the House and Senate intelligence committees, Mr. Trump wrote that he had lost confidence in Mr. Atkinson but gave little detail.

A day later, Mr. Trump was more blunt, telling reporters at the White House: "I thought he did a terrible job, absolutely terrible."

The whistleblower report was a detailed complaint written by an anonymous intelligence official who described Mr. Trump's pressure on Ukraine to investigate Democrat Joe Biden and his son. Mr. Atkinson determined the complaint was urgent and credible and therefore was required by law to disclose it to Congress, but he was overruled for weeks by the acting Director of National Intelligence, Joseph Maguire.

On Saturday, Mr. Trump questioned why Mr. Atkinson didn't speak to him about the complaint, though Mr. Atkinson's role is to provide independent oversight. "Never came in to see me, never requested to see me," Mr. Trump said. He added: "That man is a disgrace to IGs."

ELSEWHERE



Low risk activities will resume on April 11: Iran

DUBAI
Iran's President Hassan Rouhani said on Sunday that "low-risk" economic activities would resume from April 11. "Two thirds of all Iranian government employees will work out of the office from Saturday." ■REUTERS

Pakistan cleric booked for violating ban

ISLAMABAD
A case has been registered against former Lal Masjid cleric Maulana Abdul Aziz and six others in Pakistan for gathering around 400 people for Friday prayers at a prominent mosque here, despite a ban on such religious congregations. ■PTI