

China lifts Wuhan lockdown after 76 days

About 55,000 people are expected to leave the city, where the pandemic began, on the first day

ASSOCIATED PRESS
REUTERS
LONDON

After 76 days in lockdown, the Chinese city at the heart of the global pandemic reopened on Wednesday, and tens of thousands immediately hopped on trains and planes to leave. Elsewhere, the economic, political and psychological toll of fighting the virus grew increasingly clear and more difficult to bear.

In the Chinese city of 11 million where the pandemic began, residents waved flags and the city staged a light show with skyscrapers and bridges radiating images of health workers helping patients.

More than 50,000 people in Wuhan were infected, and over 3,300 deaths were reported, about 80% of all deaths in China, according to official figures.

"I haven't been outside for more than 70 days," said Tong Zhengkun. "Being indoors for so long drove me crazy."

Some 55,000 people were expected to leave Wuhan by train on Wednesday. By early morning, more than 10,000 had left by plane, an airport official said. Flights to Beijing and international locations have not resumed.

People from Wuhan arriving in Beijing must undergo two rounds of testing for the virus.

Need for caution

"We are acutely aware that we must not relax as we have not claimed final victory," Hubei Vice-Governor Cao Guangjin said at a news conference on Wednesday.

"We need to remain calm, and be just as cautious at the end as at the beginning."

Across the Atlantic, New York City endured one of its darkest days yet, with the death toll surging past 4,000, hundreds more than the number killed on 9/11. New York state recorded 731 new COVID-19 deaths on



Ready to go: A worker from China's Jilin Province, in red, with a colleague as she prepares to return home from Wuhan. • AP

Virus cases in Pakistan rise to 4,072

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
ISLAMABAD

Pakistan's COVID-19 cases increased to 4,072 on Wednesday, as Army chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa directed his top commanders to provide full support to the federal and provincial governments in combating the pandemic, which has killed 58 people in the country. The Ministry of National Health Services said that 208 new cases were added to the list in the last 24 hours.

Tuesday, its biggest one-day jump yet, for a statewide total of nearly 5,500.

New York's Mayor acknowledged on Wednesday that the true death toll is even higher because the city's count does not include people who died at home without ever being tested for

Johnson is 'responding to treatment'

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
LONDON

Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson was "responding to treatment", his spokesman said on Wednesday, as the 55-year-old leader spent a third day in intensive care battling COVID-19. Britain on Wednesday reported a record 938 new COVID-19 deaths in its daily update, 152 more than its previous highest toll, as the total number of deaths passed 7,000.

the virus. "We're talking about something like 100, 200 people per day," Bill de Blasio said.

Across the U.S., the death toll reached about 13,000, with approximately 4,00,000 confirmed infections. More economic pain was

WHO Europe warns against relaxing curbs

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
COPENHAGEN

The World Health Organization's European office said on Wednesday that despite seeing "positive signs" from some countries, it was too early to scale back measures aimed at containing the coronavirus. "Now is not the time to relax measures. It is the time to double and triple our collective efforts," WHO regional director for Europe, Hans Kluge, told a press conference.

felt. Japan, the world's third-largest economy, could contract by a record 25% this quarter, the highest since gross domestic product began to be tracked in 1955. The dismal prediction by two economists said exports are expected to dive 60% in the April-June period.

EU science chief resigns over response

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BRUSSELS

The head of the European Research Council has resigned, the EU confirmed on Wednesday, reportedly in protest at the bloc's handling of its pandemic response. Mauro Ferrari, who only took over as president of the ERC in January, told the *Financial Times* he was "extremely disappointed" by the EU's response to the pandemic, which has hit Italy and Spain particularly hard.

Europe has been scrambling to put together billions of euros to save lives and prevent bankruptcies. The countries worst hit by the virus are among those that can least afford the costs, like Italy and Spain. But they disagree over how to tackle the challenge.

Bernie Sanders opts out of Democratic presidential race

Former Vice-President Biden to face Trump in Nov. 3 election

ASSOCIATED PRESS
WASHINGTON

Senator Bernie Sanders, who saw his once strong lead in the Democratic primary evaporate as the party's establishment lined swiftly up behind rival Joe Biden, ended his presidential bid on Wednesday, an acknowledgement that the former Vice-President is too far ahead for him to have any reasonable hope of catching up.

The Vermont Senator's announcement makes Mr. Biden the presumptive Democratic nominee to challenge President Donald Trump in November.

"The path toward victory is virtually impossible," Mr. Sanders told supporters as he congratulated Mr. Biden. The former Vice-President is "a very decent man whom I will work with to move our progressive ideas forward."

Mr. Sanders initially exceeded sky-high expectations about his ability to recreate the magic of his 2016 presidential bid, and even overcame a heart attack last October. But he found himself unable to convert unwavering support from progressives into a viable path to the nomination amid "electability" fears fuelled by questions about whether his democratic socialist ideology would be palatable to general election voters.

Oldest contender

The 78-year-old Senator began his latest White House bid facing questions about whether he could win back the supporters who chose him four years ago as an insurgent alternative to the party establishment's choice, Hillary Clinton. Despite winning 22 states in 2016, there were no guarantees he'd be a major presidential contender this cycle, especially as the race's ol-



End to a solid start: Senator Bernie Sanders waving to the crowd at a campaign rally in Phoenix on March 5. • AP

dest candidate.

Mr. Sanders, though, used strong polling and solid fundraising - collected almost entirely from small donations made online - to more than quiet early doubters. Like the first time, he attracted support from young voters and was able to make new inroads within the Hispanic community, even as his appeal with African Americans remained small.

Mr. Sanders amassed the most votes in Iowa and New Hampshire, which opened primary voting, and cruised to an easy victory in Nevada - seemingly leaving him well positioned to sprint to the Democratic nomination while a deeply crowded and divided field of alternatives sunk around him.

But a crucial endorsement of Mr. Biden by influential South Carolina Representative Jim Clyburn, and a subsequent, larger-than-expected victory in South Carolina, propelled the former vice president into Super Tuesday, when he won 10 of 14 States.

In a matter of days, his top former Democratic rivals lined up and announced their endorsement of Mr. Biden. The former Vice-President's campaign had appeared on the brink of collapse after New Hamp-

shire but found new life as the rest of the party's more moderate establishment coalesced around him as an alternative to Mr. Sanders.

Loss in Michigan

Things only got worse the following week when Mr. Sanders lost Michigan, where he had campaigned hard and upset Ms. Clinton in 2016. He was also beaten in Missouri, Mississippi and Idaho the same night and the results were so decisive that Sanders headed to Vermont without speaking to the media.

The coronavirus outbreak essentially froze the campaign, preventing Mr. Sanders from holding the large rallies that had become his trademark and shifting the primary calendar. It became increasingly unclear where he could notch a victory that would help him regain ground against Mr. Biden.

Though he will not be the nominee, Mr. Sanders was a key architect of many of the social policies that dominated the Democratic primary, including a "Medicare for All" universal, government-funded health care plan, tuition-free public college, a \$15 minimum wage and sweeping efforts to fight climate change under the "Green New Deal."

Afghan govt. releases 100 Taliban prisoners

No freedom for 15 top 'commanders'

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
KABUL

The Afghan government released 100 low-risk Taliban prisoners Wednesday, officials said, a day after the insurgents announced they were walking out of talks with Kabul.

The two foes have been negotiating in Kabul since last week to try to finalise a prisoner swap that was originally supposed to take place by March 10 and pave the way for "intra-Afghan" peace talks between Kabul and the Taliban.

But the swap has been beset with problems, with Kabul claiming the Taliban want 15 "top commanders" to be released, while the insurgents have accused Afghan authorities of needlessly wasting time.

In a statement, Afghanistan's Office of the National

Security Council (NSC) said the 100 prisoners freed on Wednesday were "thoroughly vetted" and had all taken an oath never to return to the battlefield.

The government "has received the same assurance from the (Taliban's) leadership in Doha," the statement read.

An NSC spokesman earlier said the 15 commanders were not among those being released. The Taliban has not yet responded. Officials said the freed prisoners were chosen based on their health, age and length of remaining sentence "as part of our efforts for peace and containment of COVID-19."

Afghan officials have said they want to release up to 10,000 non-Taliban prisoners to slow the spread of coronavirus in jails.

Mujibur Rahman's killer to face the gallows after 45 years

Majed returned to Dhaka last month after being on the run

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
DHAKA

A Bangladesh military captain arrested after nearly 25 years on the run over the assassination of the country's founding leader will be executed, officials said Wednesday.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, father of current Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, was killed along with most of his family in a military coup on August 15, 1975, nearly four years after he led Bangladesh to independence from Pakistan.

In 1998, Abdul Majed was sentenced to death along with a dozen other Army officers over the murders.

Bangladesh's Supreme Court upheld the verdict in 2009 and five of the killers



Sheikh Mujibur Rahman

were executed several months later.

Majed is believed to have fled to India in 1996. He returned to Bangladesh last month, a prosecutor told reporters.

Acting on a tip-off, counter-terrorism police arrested Majed on Tuesday as he rode in a rickshaw in the capital Dhaka, said police inspector

Johurul Haque.

"The formalities to execute him have already begun," Justice Minister Anisul Huq told AFP, adding that the former officer will not be able to appeal his sentence.

Mr. Huq said Majed's only option to avoid the gallows was to appeal to the President for clemency.

However, since President Abdul Hamid is a close confidante of Ms. Hasina, any mercy appeal is expected to be turned down, paving the way for his execution within weeks. Ms. Hasina, whose public celebrations this year for the centenary of her father's birth have been hampered by the pandemic, survived the 1975 attack because she was in Europe with her sister.

Chinese tycoon and Xi critic faces investigation

Ren questioned response to COVID-19

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BEIJING

An outspoken Chinese Communist Party critic and millionaire property tycoon, Ren Zhiqiang, has been placed under investigation for "serious violations of discipline and law", an anti-graft watchdog said.

The Beijing Commission for Discipline Inspection announced late on Tuesday that the 69-year-old former chairman of the State-owned real estate developer Beijing Huayuan Group was under investigation.

Rights campaigners accuse President Xi Jinping and the Communist Party of using charges such as "disciplinary violations" - often considered to refer to corruption - as a way to silence dissent.

Beijing has stepped up its crackdown on civil society



Ren Zhiqiang

since Mr. Xi took power in 2012, tightening restrictions on freedom of speech and detaining activists.

Mr. Ren disappeared from the public eye in March, shortly after penning an essay that was fiercely critical of Mr. Xi's response to the coronavirus outbreak. The retired entrepreneur has emerged in recent years as one of the Party's most prominent critics in the business world.

ELSEWHERE



Germany to accept 500 children from camps

BERLIN
Germany will welcome up to 500 unaccompanied minors from Greek migrant camps in the coming weeks, Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said on Wednesday. The Minister said he hoped other countries would also take in young migrants. "We want to set an example here." • AFP

U.K. driver pleads guilty to 39 deaths in container

LONDON
Northern Irish truck driver Maurice Robinson has pleaded guilty to 39 counts of manslaughter related to the deaths of Vietnamese people found in a shipping container in southeast England last year, British media reported on Wednesday. • REUTERS

TikTok sees appeal growing during lockdowns

The app, owned by Chinese tech company ByteDance, saw 65 million worldwide downloads in March

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
NEW YORK

This is TikTok's time. The social video platform which was already a favourite of teens is increasingly being used by adults looking for ways to pass the time during coronavirus lockdowns.

Users post short videos - no longer than 60 seconds but often as short as 15 - to showcase their bite-size dance skills or share relatable experiences with a humorous twist.

The application, owned by Chinese tech company ByteDance, saw 65 million worldwide downloads in March, according to analytics site SensorTower. In addition to the existing



In sync: A file photo of two youths making a TikTok video on the terrace of their residence in Hyderabad. • AFP

800 million reported in January by DataReportal, the app is nearing a billion users - though TikTok itself does not publish such data.

And though teens have been posting on the platform for months, it seems adults

with more free time - as much of the world is encouraged to stay at home to stop the spread of the novel coronavirus - are finally catching on.

Cecile, stuck at home in Paris with her six- and three-

year-old children, was intrigued when a friend sent her a video. Soon, she had downloaded the app and was posting clips herself.

"I said to myself: 'Well, this is something funny I could do with the boys to pass the time, if only for fifteen minutes,'" she said.

Celebrities have joined the fun too, from Jennifer Lopez to Mariah Carey - even 82-year-old Jane Fonda.

Social media use is up across the board as movement is restricted around the world, but TikTok - already having a moment before the pandemic - is doing better than others.

Idyllic vacation views and perfectly framed artistic

shots - long the markers of the Instagram aesthetic - are currently out of reach for most.

But the typical TikTok post does not require a beautiful background, explained Thibault Le Ouay, founder of Pentos, a company that helps brands with their marketing strategy on the platform.

"On TikTok, you do a dance in your own house," he said.

Many videos on the platform - a descendant of the website Musical.ly - are amateur performances of short choreographed dances and lip syncs to song clips, repeated and riffed on over and over.

WILLIAM GRIMES

John Prine, the raspy-voiced country-folk singer whose ingenious lyrics to songs by turns poignant, angry and comic made him a favourite of Bob Dylan, Kris Kristofferson and others, died on Tuesday at Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville, Tennessee. He was 73.

The cause was complications from COVID-19, his family said.

Mr. Prine underwent cancer surgery in 1998 to remove a tumour in his neck identified as squamous cell cancer, which had damaged his vocal cords. In 2013, he had part of one lung removed to treat lung cancer.



John Prine

His debut album, called simply *John Prine* and released in 1971, included songs that became his signatures. Some gained wider fame after being recorded by other artists.

They included *Sam Stone*, about a drug-addicted war veteran (with the unforgetta-

ble refrain "There's a hole in Daddy's arm where all the money goes"); *Hello in There*, a heart-rending evocation of old age and loneliness; and *Angel From Montgomery*, the hard-luck lament of a middle-aged woman dreaming about a better life, later made famous by Bonnie Raitt.

"He's a true folk singer in the best folk tradition," Ms. Raitt told *Rolling Stone* in 1992.

Dylan, listing his favourite songwriters in a 2009 interview, put Mr. Prine front and centre. "Prine's stuff is pure Proustian existentialism... Midwestern mind trips to the nth degree. He writes beautiful songs." • NY TIMES