

UN warns of world's worst crisis since WWII

● Italy and Spain account for three in every four deaths on the continent

AFP | Madrid

The coronavirus pandemic has claimed more than 30,000 lives in Europe alone, a global tally showed yesterday, in what the head of the United Nations has described as humanity's worst crisis since World War II.

Italy and Spain bore the brunt of the crisis, accounting for three in every four deaths on the continent, as the grim tally hit another milestone even though half of the planet's population is already under some form of lockdown in a battle to halt contagion.

Spain reported a record 864 deaths in 24 hours, pushing the country's number of fatalities past 9,000.

The toll is only dwarfed by Italy's, where the virus has killed nearly 12,500 people.

Since emerging in China in December, COVID-19 has spread across the globe, claiming over 43,000 lives and infecting more than 860,000 people, according to an AFP tally.

President Donald Trump has warned of a "very, very painful two weeks" as the United States registered its deadliest 24 hours of what he called a "plague".

In a scramble to halt the contagion, governments have shut schools, most shops, and ordered millions of people to work from home.

Cancellations of key events on the global calendar have swept both the sports and cultural worlds, with the Edinburgh arts festival the latest to be scrapped.

For UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, the extraordinary upheaval spurred by the virus presents a real danger to the relative peace the world has seen over the last few decades.

The disease "represents a threat to everybody in the world and... an economic impact that will bring a recession that probably has no parallel in the recent past," he said.

"The combination of the two



Nigeria's economic hub Lagos is also under lockdown, its streets emptied



Indian traffic police wearing coronavirus-themed helmets prebend to attack a motorcyclist in Bangalore

facts and the risk that it contributes to enhanced instability, enhanced unrest, and enhanced conflict are things that make us believe that this is the most challenging crisis we have faced since the Second World War."

Economic desperation

With most business activity grinding to a halt for an undetermined period of time, scenes of economic desperation and unrest were emerging across the globe.

In Italy, queues were lengthening at soup kitchens while some supermarkets were reportedly pillaged.

Half a million more people now need help to afford meals, Italy's biggest union for the agriculture sector Coldiretti said, adding to the 2.7 million already in need last year.

"Usually we serve 152,525 people. But now we've 70,000 more requests," confirmed Roberto Tuorto, who runs a food aid association.

It was crucial to "ensure that the economic crisis unleashed by the virus doesn't become a security crisis," he warned.

The economic pain of lockdowns is especially acute in poorer nations.

In Tunisia several hundred protested a week-old lockdown that has disproportionately hit the poor.

"Never mind coronavirus, we're going to die anyway! Let us work!" shouted one protester in the demonstration on the outskirts of the capital Tunis.

Africa's biggest city Lagos was just into its second full day of lockdown on Wednesday -- but with some of the world's biggest slums, home to millions who live hand-to-mouth, containment will be a challenge.

Sharpening tone

Wary of a collapse of the world's economy, the globe's leading central bankers have pumped billions of liquidity into the system.

Last week, G20 leaders in turn said they were injecting \$5 trillion into the global economy to head off a feared deep recession.

But with the spread of the virus far from abating, stock markets fell again in Asia and Europe on Wednesday.

In the European Union, the terms of a rescue plan threatened to divide the bloc.

Worst-hit Italy and Spain are leading a push for a shared debt instrument -- dubbed "coronabonds", but talk of shared debt is a red line for Germany and other northern countries.

The tone sharpened this week, with some Italian politicians even taking out an advertisement in a major German newspaper to remind Europe's biggest economy of WWII debts to jolt it into action.

Asymptomatic cases

Researchers said China's decision to shutter Wuhan, ground zero for the pandemic, may have prevented hundreds of thousands of new cases.

"Our analysis suggests that without the Wuhan travel ban and the national emergency response there would have been more than 700,000 confirmed COVID-19 cases outside of Wuhan" by mid February, said Oxford University's Christopher Dye.

At the same time, focus is now turning to how asymptomatic cases may be fuelling the spread.

China on Wednesday said it has more than 1,300 asymptomatic coronavirus cases, the first time it has released such data following public concern over people who have tested positive but are not showing symptoms.

Experts agree that asymptomatic patients are likely to be infectious, but it remains unknown how responsible they are for spreading the deadly virus.

Chinese respiratory expert Zhong Nanshan said in a state media interview last week that asymptomatic carriers could potentially infect "3 to 3.5 people each".

Germany and France were also ramping up testing of the population to establish how many already have immunity.

Man found dead on Thai train tests positive for Corona

AFP | Bangkok

A man found dead on a passenger train in Thailand has tested positive for the coronavirus, officials said yesterday, as the country's death toll from the contagion more than triples from a week ago.

The 57 year old, who had just returned from Pakistan and was travelling from Bangkok to the southern province of Narathiwat, was seen "coughing and vomiting" before boarding the train on Monday, State Railway of Thailand said.

His body was found in front of a bathroom during the journey. Other passengers were evacuated from the carriage which was then disconnected from



The State Railway of Thailand shows workers wearing protective gear as they disinfect a train carriage following the death of a passenger

the rest of the train and disinfected by workers wearing protective suits. A post-humous test showed he had COVID-19.

The names of the 15 passengers who were seated in his carriage were passed to health authorities to track down.

It is not clear when the man

arrived back in Thailand. He was carrying a health certificate issued by a doctor in Pakistan on March 26 stating he did not have the virus and was fit to fly.

A state of emergency that took effect last Wednesday barred entry into the kingdom except for diplomats and Thais.

Latest developments

Tributes poured in yesterday for former Marseille president Pape Diouf, who has died aged 68 after contracting the coronavirus. Diouf, who became the first ever black president of a top European football club, died on Tuesday in Dakar, his family told.



The captain of the US nuclear-powered aircraft carrier Theodore Roosevelt told the Pentagon that new coronavirus is spreading uncontrollably through his ship and called for immediate help to quarantine its crew. But Defense Secretary Mark Esper on Tuesday ruled out evacuating the ship, whose plight bears similarities to that on civilian cruise ships where the COVID-19 illness spread.

Japan's Fujifilm has begun clinical trials to test the effectiveness of its anti-flu drug Avigan in treating patients with the new coronavirus, after reports of promising results in China. Trials in China have suggested Avigan could play a role in shortening the recovery time for patients infected with coronavirus.



The prison system in the largest US state of California plans to release about 3,500 non-violent inmates early to help mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 illness, officials said.

German sportsgear maker Adidas yesterday 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.

A famous Kuwaiti actress has sparked a furore by calling for expatriates to be expelled from the oil-rich nation so that locals can be sure of having a hospital bed if they fall ill with coronavirus. Hayat al-Fahad, 71, who is known for playing a range of roles in Arabic dramas, told a local television station that foreigners in the country should be kicked out during the health crisis. "We are fed up. If we get sick, there are no hospitals (for us)," she said during a telephone interview on Tuesday. "Why, if their countries do not want them, should we deal with them? Aren't people supposed to leave during crises? We should send them out... put them in the desert. I am not against humanity, but we have reached a stage where we're fed up."



Iran warned the US Wednesday that it was leading the Middle East to disaster in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic after it deployed Patriot air defence missiles to Iraq.

Rupert Murdoch's Australian flagship media group News Corp announced Wednesday it will stop printing around 60 regional newspapers, as the troubled sector received a fresh blow from a COVID-19 advertising downturn. News Corp said papers in the states of New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland and South Australia would cease printing and move online.

Around 4,000 South Koreans working for the US military in their country were put on unpaid leave Wednesday as Seoul and Washington bicker over funding for US forces.

An 11-year-old girl has become the youngest person in Indonesia to die after contracting the virus, with health authorities saying her death was likely linked to also having dengue fever.

Taiwan -- which has been praised for its handling of the outbreak -- will donate 10 million surgical masks and other supplies to medical workers in countries hit hard by the virus, President Tsai Ing-wen said.

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern launched a reporting service called Price Watch on Monday which she said received almost 1,000 emails in its first day of operation. "The most common complaint was... the high price of cauliflower, with some emails quoting NZ\$13 (US\$7.70) each," she told reporters yesterday. "Prices of hand sanitiser, bread, meat, facemasks and garlic also featured."



A Kashmiri villager faked his death and travelled more than a hundred miles in an ambulance with four others in a desperate bid to circumvent India's virus lockdown and return home, police said yesterday. Hakim Din was being treated for a minor head injury at a hospital in Jammu when an ambulance driver suggested the 70-year-old fake his death to get past checkpoints, police said. The region's Superintendent of Police, Ramesh Angral, said the four men and the driver travelled more than 160 kilometres (100 miles) in the ambulance, passing many checkpoints using a fake death certificate from the hospital. "The ambulance was stopped at the last checkpoint before they could reach home," Angral.

UK gov't promises more virus tests as death toll jumps. Britain has so far carried out a total of 153,000 tests, while Germany is testing 70,000 people a day. As of March 30, there were 455 deaths in Germany.

Japan will ban entry of foreigners from 73 countries and ask everyone arriving from abroad to quarantine for two weeks in its struggle to contain the coronavirus, with a senior minister warning the country had been pushed "to the brink". Medical experts advising Prime Minister Shinzo Abe told a news conference on Wednesday that the rapid spread of contagion was severely straining hospitals in the capital Tokyo, in Osaka and some other prefectures, and that quick action was vital.

Britain's Prince Charles, who has recovered after testing positive for coronavirus, praised the country's healthcare workers on Wednesday and said it was a strange and distressing time for the nation. Heir-to-the throne Charles, 71, came out of self-isolation on Monday after suffering mild symptoms, with his office saying he was in good health.



British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's photographer has coronavirus symptoms and is self-isolating, the Sun newspaper reported on Tuesday, days after he visited a temporary field hospital set up to treat patients infected with the virus.

