

Lockdown is the world's biggest psychological experiment - and we will pay the price

DR ELKE VAN HOOF

- With some 2.6 billion people around the world in some kind of lockdown, we are conducting arguably the largest psychological experiment ever;
- This will result in a secondary epidemic of burnouts and stress-related absenteeism in the latter half of 2020;
- Taking action now can mitigate the toxic effects of COVID-19 lockdowns.

In the mid-1990s, France was one of the first countries in the world to adopt a revolutionary approach for the aftermath of terrorist attacks and disasters. In addition to a medical field hospital or triage post, the French crisis response includes setting up a psychological field unit, a Cellule d'Urgence Médico-Psychologique or CUMPS.

In that second triage post, victims and witnesses who were not physically harmed receive psychological help and are checked for signs of needing further post-traumatic treatment. In those situations, the World Health Organization recommends protocols like R-TEP (Recent Traumatic Episode Protocol) and G-TEP (Group Traumatic Episode Protocol).

Since France led the way

more than 20 years ago, international playbooks for disaster response increasingly call for this two-part approach: one for the wounded and one to treat the invisible, psychological wounds of trauma.

In treating the COVID-19 pandemic, the world is scrambling to build enough tents to treat those infected with a deadly, highly contagious virus. In New York, we see literal field hospitals in the middle of Central Park.

But we're not setting up the second tent for psychological help and we will pay the price within three to six months after the end of this unprecedented lockdown, at a time when we will need all able bodies to help the world economy recover.

THE MENTAL TOLL OF QUARANTINE AND LOCKDOWN

Currently, an estimated 2.6 billion people – one-third of the world's population – is living under some kind of lockdown or quarantine. This is arguably the largest psychological experiment ever conducted. Unfortunately, we already have a good idea of its results. In late February 2020, right before European countries mandated various forms of lockdowns, The Lancet published a review of 24 studies documenting the psychological impact of quarantine (the "re-

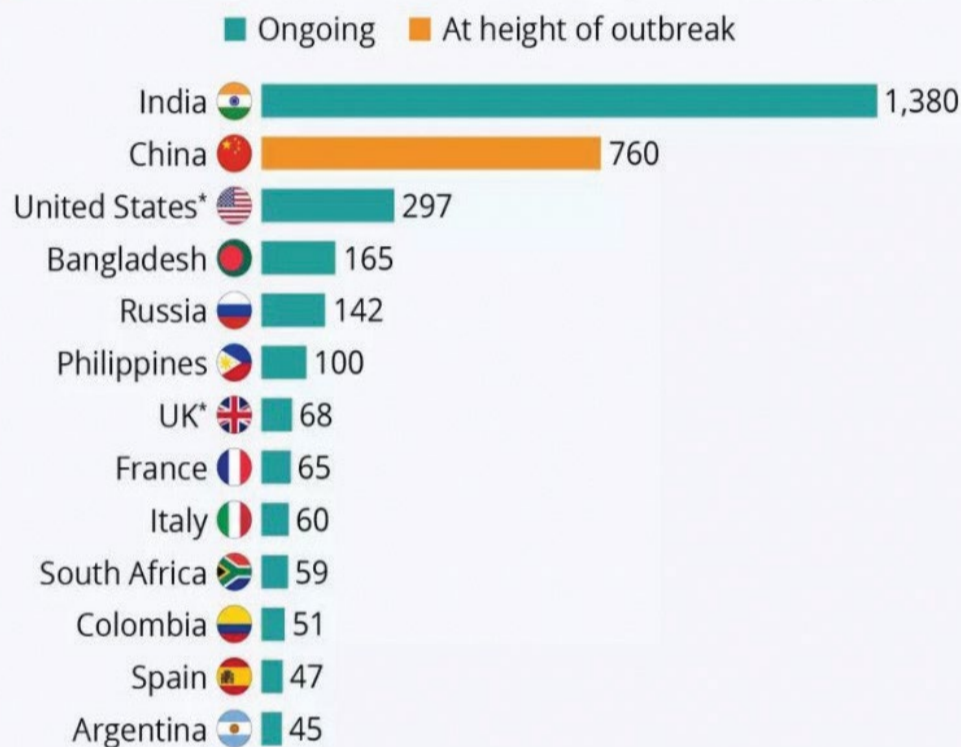
striction of movement of people who have potentially been exposed to a contagious disease"). The findings offer a glimpse of what is brewing in hundreds of millions of households around the world. In short, and perhaps unsurprisingly, people who are quarantined are very likely to develop a wide range of symptoms of psychological stress and disorder, including low mood, insomnia, stress, anxiety, anger, irritability, emotional exhaustion, depression and post-traumatic stress symptoms. Low mood and irritability specifically stand out as being very common, the study notes.

In China, these expected mental health effects are already being reported in the first research papers about the lockdown. In cases where parents were quarantined with children, the mental health toll became even steeper. In one study, no less than 28% of quarantined parents warranted a diagnosis of "trauma-related mental health disorder".

Among quarantined hospital staff, almost 10% reported "high depressive symptoms" up to three years after being quarantined. Another study reporting on the long-term effects of SARS quarantine among health-care workers found a long-term risk for alcohol abuse, self-medication and long-lasting "avoidance" behaviour. This means that

The Size of Coronavirus Lockdowns

Number of people placed on enforced lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic, per country (in million people)



* At least partly enforced
Source: Media reports

Lebanon's austerity plan offers no relief

DR. DANIA KOLEILAT KHATIB

The Lebanese government this week leaked its long-awaited "reform plan," which is supposed to form the basis for its negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and international donors. The plan is well drafted with technical and professional language and it has many figures, numbers and charts that are guaranteed to impress at first sight. However, it is an austerity plan, where the average citizen will bear the brunt of bailing out the country while existing politicians get a free pass.

At the outset, the plan states some realities that have long been denied by the political system. The plan admits that the currency is overvalued, which hinders competitiveness, and that the dollar peg is no longer sustainable. It recognizes that the central bank's reserves are depleted – something the governor has repeatedly refuted. It also admits that a full-fledged IMF program cannot be avoided.

The plan makes other important confessions. The first is to

pinpoint the destructive role the central bank played by acting like the government's cashier and the lethal instruments it utilized; namely the financial engineering that has been in use since 2016. It also admits that the banking sector is too big for the Lebanese economy, standing at about 425 percent of gross domestic product.

It also lays down clear objectives, such as fighting corruption, restructuring debt and the financial system, reforming the public sector, and streamlining expenditures. Though the report says the objectives will be attained if reforms are conducted and if external support is garnered, it still fails to offer a proper execution mechanism, a proper timeline or an indication as to how the Lebanese public and the international donors can verify that the reforms have been conducted. The plan says that the treasury will increase tax audits without giving any explanation about how. The plan talks about tighter control of customs, in ports, airports and at land borders. Again, there is no explanation of how compliance can be measured. Smuggling, which is a



Lebanese Prime Minister Hassan Diab speaks to the media outside Beirut's International Airport, Lebanon, April 5, 2020.

large part of Lebanon's tax evasion, is conducted by influential

political parties. It is almost impossible, in the current situation,

for the Lebanese government or security forces to stop it.

Reforms are impossible with the current political structure. This government was formed only when the corrupt politicians – those who brought the country to its knees – agreed on dividing the positions among themselves and putting their people in the key roles, while they rule from behind the scenes. Will they allow the government to prosecute them? Very unlikely.

The plan describes how the "government will conduct an immediate crackdown on corruption in the public sector and appoint well-renowned international forensic specialists to retrieve the stolen funds." It does not say who those specialists will be accountable to. The corrupt people are still in control. Will they allow themselves to be exposed and prosecuted? Again, very unlikely.

While the clauses about increasing taxes on the average citizen are crystal clear, the narrative and clauses about "reform" are very vague and are used as optics to lure the international community into a deal with a government that has no credibility.

The plan also carries fake opti-