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Coronavirus toll

16,961 deaths at 1100 GMT yesterday

PARIS - The number of deaths around the world from the novel coronavirus cases stood at 16,961, according to a tally compiled by AFP at 1100 GMT yesterday (24), from official sources.

More than 386,350 declared cases have been registered in 175 countries and territories since the epidemic first emerged in China in December.

The tallies, using data collected by AFP offices from national authorities and information from the World Health Organization (WHO), likely reflect only a fraction of the actual number of infections.

Many countries are now only testing cases that require hospitalization.

Italy, which recorded its first coronavirus death in February, now has more fatalities than China with 6,077, as well as having 63,927 declared infections with 7,432 recoveries.

China -- excluding Hong Kong and Macau -- has to date declared 81,171 cases, including 3,277 deaths, with 73,159 people recovered. It reported 78 new cases and seven new fatalities since Monday (23).

The third worst hit country is Spain with 2,696 fatalities and 39,673 infections, followed by Iran with 1,934 fatalities and 24,811 cases, France with 860 deaths and 19,856 cases, and the United States with 499 deaths and 46,440 cases.

Since 1900 GMT Monday, Iceland announced its first death while Myanmar reported its first case.

By continent, Europe has listed 199,779 cases and 10,724 deaths to date, Asia 98,748 cases and 3,570 deaths, the US and Canada together 48,519 cases with 523 deaths, the Middle East 29,087 cases and 1,966 deaths, Latin America and the Caribbean 6,217 cases with 112 deaths, Oceania 2,225 cases with nine deaths and Africa 1,778 cases with 57 deaths.

-AFP

Virus sparks 'unprecedented collapse' in Eurozone economy

BRUSSELS - There has been "an unprecedented collapse" in business across the Eurozone this month as EU countries impose severe restrictions on movement to slow the coronavirus, according to indicators released yesterday (24).

The PMI survey by analysis company IHS Markit confirmed what economists and governments had been bracing for: a dramatically abrupt tumble into a certain recession.

But the figures were even worse than many had expected. The provisional data showed a slump in activity in the 19-nation Eurozone in March "far exceeding that seen even at the height of the global financial crisis," IHS Markit said in a statement.

Its PMI index for this month dived to 31.4 points -- the lowest since it started its survey in 1998.

A reading below 50 points indicates a contraction. In February, the index had stood at 51.6.

Major economies Italy, France, Germany and Spain are all deeply affected and have implemented severe social and business restrictions to try to slow the virus's spread, by keeping potential carriers at home.

The Eurozone's economic struggle was worsened by some EU member states closing off their borders to neighbours, limiting the flow of goods and people within the single market.

-AFP

US cuts \$1 billion in Afghan aid

As 2 leaders reject push for unity

KABUL -- The State Department said it was cutting US\$1 billion in aid to Afghanistan this year, and potentially another \$1 billion in 2021, after Secretary of State Mike Pompeo failed to persuade rival Afghan leaders in a meeting in Kabul on Monday (23) to support a unified government. US diplomats consider a unified government crucial to preventing peace negotiations from falling apart.

Pompeo's announcement came as he was flying back to the United States after meeting with President Ashraf Ghani and the Afghan former chief executive, Abdullah Abdullah, in an attempt to mediate between the two rivals who both claim to be the legitimate president -- a crisis that threatens to split the government apart and sink hopes of ending the war.

For the top American diplomat to travel

halfway around the world in the middle of the global coronavirus epidemic signalled how seriously the United States was taking the internal Afghan bickering and the risks posed for both countries. And the cut off in aid, a major blow to the Afghan government, revealed just how frustrated the United States was with the impasse, which further imperils an already precarious peace deal.

"The United States is disappointed in them and what their conduct means for Afghanistan and our shared interests," Pompeo said in a statement. "Their failure has harmed US-Afghan relations and, sadly, dishonours those Afghan, Americans and coalition partners who have sacrificed their lives and treasure in the struggle to build a new future for this country."

-NYT

64 migrants found dead in cargo container in Mozambique

MAPUTO - More than 60 suspected undocumented migrants from Ethiopia were found dead in a cargo container in Mozambique's northwest Tete province yesterday (24), a senior hospital official said.

"A truck transporting illegal immigrants from Malawi, suspected to be Ethiopians, was stopped at the Mussacana weight bridge in Tete, and 64 people were found dead. Only 14 survived," the official, who asked not be named because he does not have the authority to speak to the media, told AFP.

"The cause of death is presumed to be asphyxiation." The victims were discovered in a blue cargo container loaded on to a haulage truck, according to pictures seen by AFP.

Mozambique is generally seen as a smuggling corridor for migrants seeking to make their way to South Africa. South Africa -- the continent's most industrialized country -- is a magnet for poor migrants not only from neighbouring countries such as Lesotho and Zimbabwe, but even nations further afield, such as Ethiopia.

-AFP

Tokyo Olympics postponed

TOKYO -- After months of internal discussions and mounting pressure from nations and athletes across the world, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) will postpone the Summer Games that had been scheduled to begin in late July in Tokyo, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan said yesterday (24).

Instead, the Games, the world's largest sporting event, will take place in the summer of 2021, a change that will wreak havoc with sports schedules but should bring great relief to the athletes, organizers and health officials who had increasingly pressed that the coronavirus pandemic made it unsafe to go forward with the event.

The decision became inevitable after the national Olympic committee in Canada announced on Sunday (22) that it was withdraw-

ing from the Games, and Australia's committee told its athletes that it was not possible to train for this summer under the widespread restrictions in place to control the virus. The US Olympic and Paralympic Committee, after initially declining to take a stand, joined the fray Monday (23) night, urging the IOC to postpone.

In announcing the decision, Abe said he had asked Thomas Bach, president of the IOC, for a one-year delay and he had "agreed 100%".

The IOC leader has acknowledged the disruption but said that a delay was the only way to ensure that athletes could train safely and the more than \$10 billion Japan has spent to prepare for the Olympics during the past seven years would not go to waste.

-NYT



-Ishara S. KODIKARA / AFP

An elderly woman, wearing a rag-tag face mask carries a bag of rice and attempts to cross the road at Pugoda on the outskirts of Sri Lanka's capital city Colombo yesterday (24). Authorities briefly lifted a curfew in several districts, including Colombo to allow residents to stock up on essentials amid concerns over the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus. However, the long queues at supermarkets and crowded sidewalks raised concerns

among authorities who later declared the districts of Colombo, Gampaha and Kalutara high risk areas for the spread of COVID-19 and imposed an indefinite curfew beginning at 2:00 p.m. yesterday and asked major food chains and wholesale suppliers to deliver the necessary food items to the resident in the three districts, beginning today (25). Meanwhile, the number of coronavirus cases in Sri Lanka passed the century mark, with five

new cases confirmed yesterday bringing the total to 103. The health ministry said 229 patients were under observation in hospitals across the country on suspicion of having contracted the virus and two patients who were initially infected with the virus, a Chinese woman and a 52-year-old Sri Lankan tour guide, had successfully recovered and had been discharged from the hospital.

Read more on page 3

WHO warns

US could become 'coronavirus epicentre'

GENEVA/ BEIJING - The United States could become the global epicentre of the coronavirus outbreak, the World Health Organization (WHO) said yesterday (24), as governments around the world tightened lockdowns affecting 1.7 billion people in a desperate effort to slow the spread of the deadly disease.

But the Chinese province of Hubei, where the virus was first identified in December, said it would lift travel restrictions on people leaving the region as the epidemic there eases.

WHO spokeswoman Margaret Harris said in Geneva there had been a "very large acceleration" in corona-

virus infections in the United States which had the potential of becoming the new epicentre.

Over the past 24 hours, 85% of new cases were from Europe and the United States, she told reporters. Of those, 40% were from the United States.

Asked whether the United States could become the new epicentre, Harris said: "We are now seeing a very large acceleration in cases in the US. So it does have that potential. We cannot say that is the case yet but it does have that potential."

Some US state and local officials have decried a lack of coordinated

federal action, saying having localities act on their own has put them in competition for supplies.

US President Donald Trump acknowledged the difficulty.

"The World market for face masks and ventilators is Crazy. We are helping the states to get equipment, but it is not easy," he wrote in a tweet.

As of Monday (23), the virus had infected more than 42,000 people in the United States, killing at least 559.

Meanwhile, Hubei province, where the novel coronavirus emerged late last year, will allow healthy residents to travel from midnight, officials said yesterday, two months after they

were ordered to stay indoors.

The relaxation of rules will not apply to the hardest-hit city of Wuhan until April 8. China's authoritarian government has trumpeted its response to the crisis since doctors began to get a handle on cases of COVID-19, and yesterday State media proudly reported that a popular section of the Great Wall would re-open.

Visitors have to wear a mask and stay a metre from everyone else, media said.

Overall, China had 78 new infections yesterday, the vast majority brought in from overseas.

-Agencies

Trending News

Sri Lanka: President Gotabaya Rajapaksa appoints a committee comprising representatives of the Sri Lanka Bar Association and the Department of Prisons to look into releasing people who have been jailed over minor offences and those who could not provide bail.

-Health authorities issue guidelines to the country's elderly citizens on how to protect themselves from the COVID-19 pandemic, which includes avoiding hugging and kissing other members of the family, keeping the mind relaxed and getting a good night's sleep.

-The Ministry of Health decides to

keep all pharmacies in the island open during curfew hours.

India: A protest led by Muslim women in New Delhi, considered the epicentre of the agitation against the citizenship law, is cleared amid measures to slow the spread of coronavirus in the country.

France: Albert Uderzo, the French comic artist who illustrated the cartoon character Asterix the Gaul, dies of a heart attack at the age of 92.

-Diagnostics firm Biomerieux says it had secured emergency approval

from US regulators for a coronavirus test that can produce results in 45 minutes, potentially offering a new tool for stemming the outbreak.

Syria: The United Nations top envoy for the country calls for a nationwide ceasefire to allow for a better response to the threat of the novel coronavirus.

Egypt: Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouli announces a night-time curfew will be imposed for two weeks from today (25) to contain the spread of the coronavirus.

United Nations: The UN rights

chief calls for any sanctions imposed on countries like Iran facing the new coronavirus pandemic to be "urgently re-evaluated" to avoid pushing strained medical systems into collapse.

South Africa: People across the country brace for a 21-day lockdown after the government announced sweeping new measures to tackle the spread of the new coronavirus.

Bangladesh: A minister says the government will free opposition leader Khaleda Zia from jail for six months so she can get medical treatment.

Quote for Today

In fair weather prepare for foul.

-Thomas Fuller

Word for Today

Hypermnnesia [hahypermneezhuh] - noun-the condition of having an unusually vivid or precise memory

Today in History

1975 - King Faisal of Saudi Arabia is shot dead by a nephew with a history of mental illness

Today is..

Tolkien Reading Day

A day to commemorate the Downfall of Sauron and discover that there is much more to Tolkien than just The Lord of the Rings

HOT TOPICS

By Jim Tankersley, Maggie Haberman and Roni Caryn Rabin

Over health experts' objections

Trump considers reopening economy

WASHINGTON — As the United States entered Week 2 of trying to contain the spread of the coronavirus by shuttering large swaths of the economy, President Donald Trump, Wall Street executives and many conservative economists began questioning whether the government had gone too far and should instead lift restrictions that are already inflicting deep pain on workers and businesses.

Consensus continues to grow among government leaders and health officials that the best way to defeat the virus is to order nonessential businesses to close and residents to confine themselves at home. Britain, after initially resisting such measures, essentially locked down its economy Monday (23), as did the governors of Virginia, Michigan and Oregon. More than 100 million Americans will soon be subject to stay-at-home orders.

Relaxing those restrictions could significantly increase the death toll from the virus, public health officials warn. Many economists say there is no positive trade-off — resuming normal activity prematurely would only strain hospitals and result in even more deaths, while exacerbating a recession that has most likely already arrived.

The economic shutdown is causing damage that is only beginning to appear in official data. Morgan Stanley researchers said Monday that they now expected the economy to shrink by an annualized rate of 30% in the second quarter of this year, and the unemployment rate to jump to nearly 13%. Both would be records, in modern economic statistics.

Officials have said the federal government's initial 15-day period for social distancing is vital to slowing the spread of the virus, which has already infected more than 40,000 people in the United States. But Trump and a chorus of conservative voices have begun to suggest that the shock to the economy could hurt the country more than deaths from the virus.

On Monday, Trump said his administration would reassess whether to keep the economy shuttered after the initial 15-day period ends next Monday, saying it could extend another week and that certain parts of the country could reopen sooner than others, depending on the extent of infections.

"Our country wasn't built to be shut down," Trump said during a briefing at the White House. "America will, again, and soon, be open for business. Very soon. A lot sooner than three or four months that somebody was suggesting. Lot sooner. We cannot let the cure be worse than the problem itself."

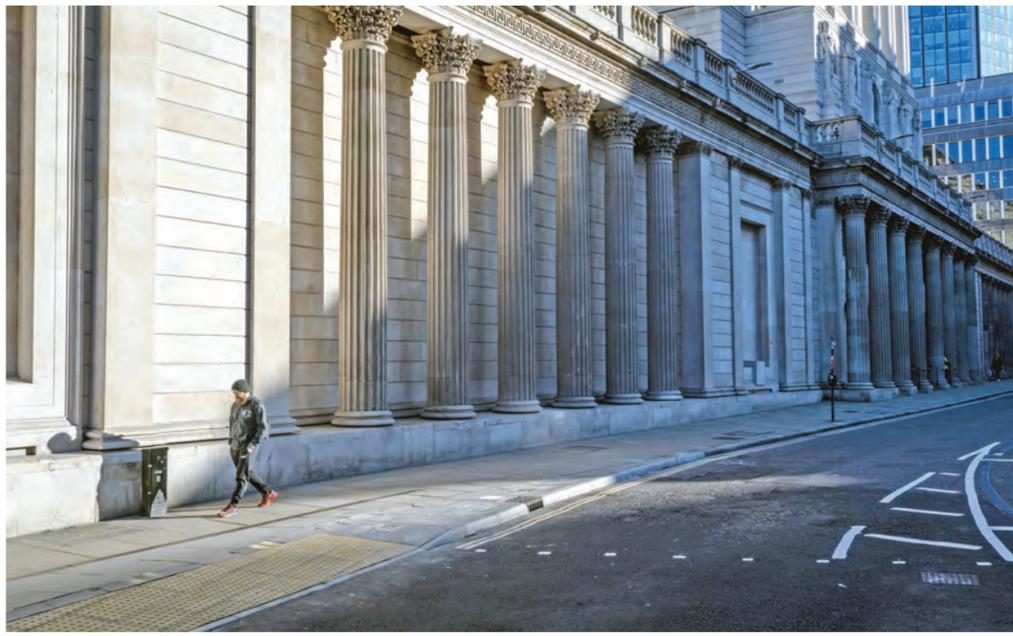
Similar views are emanating from parts of corporate America, where companies are struggling with a shutdown that has emptied hotels, airplanes, malls and restaurants and sent the stock market tumbling so fast that automatic circuit breakers to halt trading have been tripped repeatedly. Stocks have collapsed about 34% since the coronavirus spread globally — the steepest plunge in decades — erasing three years of gains under Trump.

Any push to loosen the new limits on commerce and movement would contradict the consensus advice of public health officials, risking a surge in infections and deaths from the virus. Many economists warn that abruptly reopening the economy could backfire, overwhelming an already stressed health care system, sowing uncertainty among consumers, and ultimately dealing deeper, longer-lasting damage to growth. The recent rise of cases in Hong Kong, after there had been an easing of the spread of the virus, is something of an object lesson about how ending strict measures too soon can have dangerous consequences. Yet places like China, which took the idea of lockdown to the extreme, have managed to flatten the curve.

"You can't call off the best weapon we have, which is social isolation, even out of economic desperation, unless you're willing to be responsible for a mountain of deaths," said Arthur Caplan, a professor of bioethics at NYU Langone Medical Center. "Thirty days makes more sense than 15 days. Can't we try to put people's lives first for at least a month?"

For the last four days, some White House officials, including those working for Vice President Mike Pence, who leads the coronavirus task force, have been raising questions about when the government should start easing restrictions.

-New York Times



Andrew Testa/The New York Times

A lone pedestrian on a street in the City of London, the financial district, during what is normally the morning rush hour on Monday (23). Markets stumbled on Monday on the news that a political stalemate in the Senate had slowed a rescue plan for the US economy.

By Mark Landler and Stephen Castle

UK wakes up to lockdown

LONDON — Facing a growing storm of criticism about his laissez-faire response to the fast-spreading coronavirus, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced Monday (23) that he would place Britain under a virtual lockdown, closing all nonessential shops, banning meetings of more than two people and requiring people to stay in their homes, except for trips for food or medicine.

People who flout the new restrictions, the prime minister said, will be fined by the police.

The steps, which Johnson outlined in a televised address to the nation, bring him into alignment with European leaders like President Emmanuel Macron of France and Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany, who have all but quarantined their countries in a desperate bid to slow the outbreak.

"No prime minister wants to enact measures like this," a grave Johnson said. "I know the damage that this disruption is doing and will do to people's lives, to their businesses and to their jobs."

But while these were the most draconian restrictions placed on the British people since World War II, Johnson is still leaving a bit of breathing room.

The prime minister said people also could leave their houses for exercise, either alone or with family members, and he did not close parks in London, which became a symbol of Britain's nonchalant response this past weekend when they were thronged with people.

Nor is Britain requiring that people who leave the houses carry documents, as France now does. Johnson did not detail what fines those who did not comply with the rules would face.

Still, as the wail of ambulance sirens echoed through London's largely empty streets Monday, there was evidence that Britons were belatedly coming to terms with the need for ordinary life to come to a halt.

The number of confirmed cases in Britain rose to 6,650 on Monday, up from 5,683 a day earlier, while the death toll jumped by 54, to 335. British officials warn that the country is about two weeks behind Italy in the spread of the virus, suggesting that those numbers are about to balloon.

Johnson has made substantial moves in the past week, closing schools as well as pubs, restaurants, gyms, and theatres. But at every step, he has seemed like a leader acting under duress. And in several cases, his government was playing catch-up to a private sector that had already acted on its own.

The Premier League cancelled the rest of its soccer season before the government banned large sports gatherings. Parents began pulling children out of school before they were closed. Department stores, boutiques, hairdressers and other shops began closing before Johnson's Monday directive.

At times, Johnson's earlier steps had sowed confusion. He initially asked people to avoid pubs but did not ask the pubs to close their doors, prompting some people, including his own father, Stanley Johnson, to declare they still planned to go.

This weekend, images of crowds flouting social distancing rules in London parks under early-spring sunshine whipped up the political pressure for Johnson to do more. Among those calling for tougher measures was Keir Starmer, the front-runner to become the next leader of the opposition Labour Party.

"In these extraordinary times, the government must now set out further compliance measures, such as those introduced in other countries," Starmer wrote on Twitter. "These are vital days in the battle against the coronavirus."

Johnson's response has come under growing criticism, even from right-leaning papers that are normally supportive of him.

"Since the start he has appeared behind the curve," said an editorial in The Times of London on Monday. "Considerable time that could have been spent preparing for the crisis appears to have been squandered."

Johnson, the paper said, risked being compared not to his hero, the wartime prime minister Winston Churchill, but to Churchill's predecessor, Neville Chamberlain, who was discredited for his policy of appeasing Nazi Germany and uttered the fateful phrase, "peace for our time."

The government's deliberations are also drawing more scrutiny, after The Sunday Times published a lengthy investigation of Johnson's abrupt shift from a less-stringent approach to the virus to one that more closely aligns with the rigorous measures in France, Spain and Germany.

Italy shut down all nonessential businesses and industries on March 21. A day later, the Lombardy region, the epicentre of the country's outbreak, banned all outdoor physical activity.

Much of the criticism has fallen on Johnson himself. Commentators say he has veered from issuing stark warnings about the loss of life to lamenting that he has had to ask people to stop congregating at pubs.

Although the prime minister has appeared on TV almost every day — usually flanked by his chief scientific and medical advisers — there has been little follow-up from the government about what kinds of social distancing rules people should adopt and what the risks of failing to do so are.

Critics noted that the government spent large sums last year on an advertising campaign to prepare the public for Britain's departure from the European Union. But it has failed to produce a coherent information campaign to clarify how people should observe the new social distancing rules.

-New York Times

In Spain

Soldiers find bodies in retirement homes

MADRID — Spanish soldiers deployed to help fight the new coronavirus outbreak have found elderly patients abandoned, and sometimes dead, at retirement homes, as an ice rink inside a Madrid shopping mall was turned into a temporary morgue to cope with a surge in cases.

The army has been charged with helping to disinfect retirement homes in Spain, one of the country's worst hit by the pandemic. Dozens of deaths from COVID-19 have been recorded at facilities across the country.

"We are going to be strict and inflexible when dealing with the way old people are treated in these residences," Defence Minister Margarita Robles said in an interview with private television channel Telecinco.

"The army, during certain visits, found some old people completely abandoned, sometimes even dead in their beds," she added.

An investigation has been launched, the general prosecutor announced.

The coronavirus death toll in Spain surged to 2,182 on Monday (23) after 462 people died within 24 hours, according to health ministry figures.

Meanwhile, the ice rink at the Palacio de Hielo, or Ice Palace, shopping centre in Madrid was turned into a temporary morgue to deal with a surge in deaths in the capital, a spokeswoman for Madrid

city hall told AFP.

Earlier, the city hall said the city's 14 public cemeteries would stop accepting more bodies because staff there did not have adequate protective gear.

The improvised morgue would start to be used "in the coming hours," the regional government of Madrid said.

"This is a temporary and exceptional measure which aims to mitigate the pain of the family members of the victims and the situation hospitals in Madrid are facing."

A nearby congress centre has been converted into a field hospital for coronavirus patients that will have a total of 5,500 beds.

The elderly are especially vulnerable in the global pandemic and officials around the world are increasingly calling for extreme measures to safeguard them.

Retirement homes are "an absolute priority for the government", Health Minister Salvador Illa told a press conference.

"We will exercise the most intensive monitoring of these centres."

Under coronavirus protocols, health workers have been instructed to leave bodies in place in suspected COVID-19 deaths until the arrival of a doctor. But given the upsurge in deaths the delay can be lengthy.

-Agence France-Presse

By Fulya Ozerkan

Turks fight coronavirus with secret weapon: eau de cologne

ISTANBUL — In Turkey, sprinkling hands with cologne has long been a ritual for a visit to the barber, a meal at a restaurant or even a trip on the bus.

It is seen as a symbol of hospitality, as well as an aid to hygiene, in a country that sets great store by both.

Now Turkish cologne -- found in almost every household, either in the fridge or a closet -- is seeing unprecedented demand as a weapon in the fight against the novel coronavirus.

Many Turks believe cologne, which has a high alcohol content, is effective in keeping hands and faces clean and thus warding off the risk of COVID-19.

Long queues could be seen outside cologne shops in Istanbul's busy spice market, in the historic Eminonu district, in early March before Turkey announced its first confirmed case.

Now shops and pharmacies have put up signs reading "cologne sold out."

People are commonly seen sprinkling cologne into their hands in the middle of the street, while taxi drivers offer doses to their clients.

An association in the north west-

ern city of Izmit is delivering free cologne as well as bread to the elderly, local media reported.

Eyup Sabri Tuncer, a leading traditional cologne maker, said it has received tens of thousands of orders in recent weeks.

"In order for a healthy delivery to the customers... we have temporarily suspended further online orders," company official Atilla Ariman told AFP.

Bottles of cologne have flown off the shelves since Health Minister Fahrettin Koca urged Turks to use the liquid as an alternative hand sanitizer against the virus.

Demand is so great that a black market has developed for both cologne and other hand sanitizers, with Istanbul police raiding a manufacturing plant last week to confiscate products made "unhealthily."

Announcing his government's economic stimulus package last week, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said face masks as well as cologne would be handed out free to people aged 65 and over.

Turkey has so far recorded 37 coronavirus-related deaths and 1,529 cases.

-Agencies

By Victoria Loguinova-Yakovleva

For Moscow's quarantined 100,000 cameras are watching

MOSCOW — A vast and contentious network of facial recognition cameras keeping watch over Moscow is now playing a key role in the battle against the spread of the coronavirus in Russia.

The city rolled out the technology just before the epidemic reached Russia, ignoring protests and legal complaints over sophisticated state surveillance. Since last month, thousands of Muscovites have been confined to their homes for 14 days of compulsory quarantine after returning from virus-hit countries, being in contact with those infected or diagnosed with mild symptoms.

Police have logged their details and warned them that sneaking out into the city of 16 million residents and daily visitors could lead to a five-year jail term or deportation for foreigners.

"We are constantly checking that this regulation is being observed, including through the use of automated facial recognition systems," Mayor Sergei Sobyanin wrote in his blog in February. The Russian capital already had a tight network of 170,000 security cameras, set up in streets and metro stations throughout the city over the past decade.

Around 100,000 have now been linked to artificial intelligence systems that can identify people being filmed. The remaining cameras are due to be connected soon.

Moscow police said last week that the cameras that are linked have allowed them to identify almost 200 people who broke quarantine rules.

As well as the cameras, Russia has said it is drawing on an array of technology to fight the virus, including telemedicine consultations, the real-time monitoring of supermarket shelves and identifying and removing false news stories from social media. President Vladimir Putin last week toured a hi-tech centre set up to monitor the virus situation and Russia's response.

The country, as of Monday (23), had reported 438 coronavirus infections, most of them in Moscow. One person who was infected has died but officials are not linking the death to the virus.

Moscow City Hall has boasted that the network of cameras is a particularly effective tool.

Sobyanin has said that the authorities have contacts and work addresses for 95% of those quarantined after returning from high-risk countries.

"We've identified where they are," said the mayor, who heads a working group on combatting the virus set up by Putin. Last month on his blog he praised the efficiency of the facial recognition system with a story of a Chinese woman who tested positive soon after arrival and was hospitalised.

Her flatmate was quarantined but security cameras filmed her walking outside and meeting a male friend. The mayor added that the authorities swiftly gathered contacts of more than 600 of the woman's neighbours and even her taxi driver from the airport. Facial recognition technology was first tested during the 2018 World Cup in Russia before going fully online in January, just before the pandemic hit.

"The probability of a mistake by our facial recognition algorithm is 1 in 15 million," said Alexander Minin, CEO of NtechLab, the company that won the city's tender to supply the technology.

The firm's devices, which have been exported to China and Latin America, can identify someone from their silhouette alone "80% of the time," he told AFP at the start of the year.

Russia alongside China lead the field globally with the most sophisticated technology, which they export to some 100 countries, Valentin Weber, a researcher in cybersecurity at the University of Oxford, wrote in a 2019 paper.

"Due to stronger data protection laws in Europe, facial recognition has not yet been implemented on a large scale. Russian and Chinese companies have had less legal constraints to gather and use data than their European counterparts," Weber told AFP. Before the coronavirus pandemic, critics warned of the potential for excessive state surveillance reminiscent of the all-seeing 'Big Brother' in George Orwell's novel '1984'.

The technology's creator Minin says that he has confidence in the Moscow authorities and insists that personal data like passport details and phone numbers is not stored on the same databases as camera images. He says the data sets can only be matched by law enforcement if deemed strictly necessary. But opponents see such technology as threatening, given the Soviet history of mass surveillance of those deemed by the KGB secret police to be state enemies.

Vocal rights activist and lawyer Alyona Popova launched legal action against the use of facial recognition at an officially authorised opposition protest in September last year.

She said cameras were attached to metal detectors that every participant had to pass through.

Her complaint was eventually thrown out, but an online petition she launched on Change.org against the technology's use gained almost 75,000 signatures before the COVID-19 crisis.

NtechLab chief Minin warned that face painting or covering up ultimately won't help those wanting to avoid being identified.

"We can work even when up to 40% of the face is covered by a helmet or medical mask," he said.

-Agence France-Presse

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Govt. declares three districts 'high risk' for COVID-19

Organizes home delivery of essentials

COLOMBO - Sri Lanka has declared three districts, Colombo, Gampaha and Kalutara, as high risk for the spread of COVID-19 and indefinitely extended the curfew imposed at 2:00 yesterday (24). And in a move to ensure consumers have their essentials, the government has asked major food chains and wholesale suppliers to provide the nec-

essary food items to the resident in the three districts.

A statement from the Presidential Secretariat said Cargills Food City, Keels, Laugfs, State-run Sathosa, Araliya and Nipuna were among supermarket chains that have been asked to provide the home delivery service.

It said a Task Force under former minister

Basil Rajapaksa had been formed to direct civil administration officials to ensure the supply of essentials, and that vehicles transporting the deliveries will be given permits by the police to travel during the curfew.

The delivery service is set to commence today (25), the statement said.

The decision to introduce the tough meas-

ures were taken after observing the large crowds and long queues, as people thronged supermarkets, grocery stores and pharmacies to purchase essentials when the curfew was lifted for a few hours yesterday, greatly increasing the risk of spreading the COVID-19 infection.

-economynext.com/ENCL

Sri Lanka's coronavirus count reaches 101

COLOMBO -The number of coronavirus cases in Sri Lanka passed the century mark, with three new cases confirmed by yesterday (24) afternoon.

The state information office, quoting the Director General of Health Service, Dr. Anil Jasinghe, said Sri Lanka now had 101 confirmed cases, including one first wave patient from China.

The health ministry said 229 patients are under observation in hospitals across the country on suspicion of having contracted the virus. It also said two patients who were initially infected with the virus, a Chinese woman and a 52-year-old Sri Lankan tour guide, had successfully recovered and had been discharged from the hospital.

Health Minister Pavithra Wanniarachchi said the discharges were a great relief a reason to be happy.

However, the government yesterday imposed an indefinite curfew in the districts of Colombo, Gampaha and Kalutara, deeming them high risk areas.

Sri Lanka's daily increase was in the single digits or low single digits, but yesterday's crowds in some areas had raised concerns among authorities.

"Health officials fear that this in turn could lead to a wider and faster spread of the virus," said a statement from the Presidential Secretariat.

Puttalam, previously regarded as hot-spot of Italian returnees was dropped from the indefinite curfew list.

-ENCL



- J. sujeewakumar /ENCL

Men and women queue up outside a supermarket chain in Colombo, yesterday (24) as the curfew was lifted from 6:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. to allow residents to shop for food items and other essentials. Supermarkets only allowed a limited number of people inside the premises leading to long queues and longer waits, with not many observing the one-metre distance rule.

Party leaders call for reconvening of Parliament

COLOMBO - Political party leaders met at Temple Trees, Colombo yesterday (24) to discuss the situation in the country.

The meeting was held on the initiative of Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa.

Former Tamil National Alliance Parliamentarian M. A. Sumanthiran said the issue of reconvening Parliament was raised at the meeting by him and Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) leader Rauf Hakeem.

"I said it was not necessary to meet physically in one place but that it was important to have an active Parliament so that feedback from the people are received and for

better accountability. We may also need to pass legislation regarding election. The mode of meeting can be decided on later," he said.

Sumanthiran said in a Facebook post that there was no response to this suggestion but there was somewhat of a favourable response to his suggestion that Party Leaders at least meet regularly, though not physically.

The party leaders sat keeping a distance between them while some wore face masks.

-CG/ENCL

SriLankan staff facing discrimination

COLOMBO - Staff of SriLankan Airlines who are flying aircraft braving a global Coronavirus epidemic, keeping Sri Lanka connected to the world, bringing in vital medical and other supplies and also taking exports out, is facing discrimination in society, the carrier said.

Issuing a statement, the airline appealed to the general public to respect its employees for their service to the country at a time of need.

"SriLankan Airlines as the National Airline of Sri Lanka is categorized as an essential service to render air services to the government and the people of Sri Lanka even at a time where there is risk to health, personal safety that includes the whole or part of the population," the statement said, noting that in addition to taking cargo in and out, SriLankan is also carrying tourists returning to their home countries.

The airline said staff was facing discrimination in social media.

"It is extremely unfortunate that these posts have subjected the Airlines' staff and their immediate families to discrimination, distress and embarrassment at public places such as hotels, schools and hospitals," SriLankan said.

It noted that SriLankan staff have regular training on flying under contagion situations and are regularly updated with regard to operational safety adhering to directives from the World Health Organization, Procedural guidance issued by the International Air Transport Association for cabin crew, technical staff and cargo handling are also followed, it added.

SriLankan requested social media users to check the veracity of information and refrain from posting content that may discriminate, distress or demotivate the Airlines' staff and their family members who are currently fulfilling a much-required national mission.

-ENCL

Agricultural ministry allays fears of food shortage

Says Sri Lanka has food for several months

COLOMBO - Sri Lanka has enough food for several months, the Ministry of Agriculture said yesterday (24) as large crowds thronged supermarkets for groceries, when curfew was lifted for several hours and the health ministry announced the release of the first batch of quarantined persons.

Sri Lanka also discharged the first two patients who had recovered from COVID-19.

Army Chief Shavendra Silva asked the public not to discriminate against anyone released from quarantine.

The Ministry of Agriculture said private and State run super markets have sufficient

stocks for people to buy whenever the curfew is lifted. It said arrangements have also been made to distribute pre-packed packages priced at Rs 500 and Rs 1000 at housing schemes and apartment blocks which are densely populated.

Prima Ceylon said there was three month's stock of wheat in the country and it had the ability to distribute food around the country.

The ministry said economic centres in Dambulla, Meegoda and Narahenpita were active with trucks full of vegetables arriving and departing to many parts of the country.

-economynext.com

COVID-19 fund launched to help finance mitigation activities

COLOMBO -President Gotabaya Rajapaksa had set up a special fund to strengthen mitigation activities aimed at controlling the spread of COVID-19 virus in the country and related social welfare programs. Named 'COVID - 19 Healthcare and Social Security Fund,' it was set up with a Rs 100 million donation from the President's Fund, with an open invitation for financial contributions from local as well as foreign donors.

A special account had been opened at the Corporate Branch of the Bank of Ceylon under the account number of 85737373. Deposits can also be made through cheques or telegraphic transfers.

The donations, government sources said, would be exempted from tax and foreign exchange regulations.

The management of the Fund, the source

said, has been entrusted with a highly qualified panel of professionals in the fields of administration, finance and banking sectors, comprising the IGP, secretaries to the ministries, Director General of Health, audit and banking experts.

President Gotabaya Rajapaksa has requested everyone to work together in the wake of the present challenge before the nation.

The Secretary to the President, Dr. P. B. Jayasundara, said the fund is an opportunity for local and foreign companies to make their contributions towards a humanitarian mission, and was hopeful international financial organizations and leading conglomerates in Sri Lanka as well as abroad would play a leading role.

Newin.asia/ENCL

Singapore donates 5000 COVID-19 test kits to SL

COLOMBO - Temasek Foundation International, a Singapore company, on Friday (20) donated 5000 COVID-19 test kits to the Sri Lankan Ministry of Health, to boost its battle against the fast spreading novel coronavirus. The consignment was sent to Sri Lanka and received by the health authorities in Colombo on Sunday (22).

The 5000 Fortitude Kit 2.0 was handed over to the Sri Lankan High Commissioner Sashikala Premawardhane by Chief Executive of Tamasek Foundation International, Benedict Cheong, at the High Commission premises.

Fortitude Kit 2.0, designed by Singapore's Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A* Star) to detect the SARS-CoV-2 virus, comes complete with all the materials required for the RT-PCR reaction, which includes the primer probes mix, the enzyme mix, the positive control, negative control and internal control template. The test kit is able to give results in less than three hours.

The test kits are deemed immensely useful in Sri Lanka's efforts in dealing with the COVID-19 situation.

The Sri Lanka High Commission in Singapore said the donation was a testimony to the longstanding friendly relations between Singapore and Sri Lanka.

-ENCL

Italy thanks SL for numerous expressions of support

COLOMBO - Italy yesterday (24) thanked Sri Lanka for the numerous expressions of support as the country continues to suffer from the novel coronavirus.

The Italian Embassy in Sri Lanka, while thanking people for their expressions of support, dismissed several media reports with regard to mass burials in certain areas and people being buried naked and without religious rites as completely false.

"Although it is true that public funerals are not allowed, however loved ones can be mourned by a restricted number of family members in the presence of the parish priest. Each deceased (whether in a single coffin or - in some cases - his/her ashes) is buried individually with all due respect, according to desired religious practices and laws, with utmost respect for the deceased - a custom which is deeply rooted in the Italian culture," the embassy said in a statement.

The embassy also noted that the returnees from Italy referenced in recent news publications have never obtained a visa from the embassy, nor have they requested one.

-ENCL

Amid coronavirus fears Wife of political prisoner demands release of husband

COLOMBO - The wife of a political prisoner has handed a plea to the Mullaitivu District Secretariat, demanding President Gotabaya Rajapaksa release her husband and other political prisoners over concerns of them catching the coronavirus (COVID-19).

Nadesu Kuganathan, from Mullaitivu, undertook a rehabilitation program before he was rearrested in 2013 and has been detained since, at the New Magazine Prison in Colombo.

His wife has demanded that President Rajapaksa should release her husband and

other political prisoner inmates who may be at risk of contracting the coronavirus.

She delivered a written plea to the government agent of the Mullaitivu Division Secretariat, K. Vimalanathan, on Friday (20).

Earlier yesterday (24), the Health Promotion Bureau of the Ministry of Health declared that 100 people had tested positive for the COVID-19 coronavirus infections, and it was currently unclear whether inmates in prisons are being tested for the coronavirus.

-TG

Christians fast and pray in fight against coronavirus

COLOMBO - Sri Lankan Catholics have observed fasting and prayers seeking God's intercession to prevent, protect and heal all affected by COVID-19 in the country and all over the world even though the local church has cancelled Masses.

The country had been under lockdown since the coronavirus count rose to 86, with the government imposing an indefinite curfew to minimize public gatherings. The Church cancelled Masses and other services from March 15 because of the rapid rise in coronavirus cases in Sri Lanka.

The decision came in the middle of the Lenten season that features large gatherings such as 40-day healing services, the Way of the Cross, Lenten pilgrimages and group prayer services.

Maria Isabel, a member of the Legion of Mary, said she and her group observed fasting and prayers in their houses to free the country from the coronavirus.

Instead of going to church, Isabel lies on a mat with her family members on the floor in front of St. Mary's statue. She performs prayers with her rosary and prayer book.

"Mother Mary ... we hope to save our country and save all of who suffer from this menace," said Isabel.

The parish priest of Weliveriya in Colombo Archdiocese travelled alone in a vehicle with the Blessed Sacrament through the village to bless all villagers last Friday (20)," said Isabel. "We perform prayers following the guidance of the bishops' conference."

Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith of Colombo urged the faithful to pray for all those affected by the coronavirus worldwide. "Today, we observe fasting and pray," he said in his sermon telecast on Sunday (22).

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka (CBCSL) called on all followers to observe Sunday as a day of fasting and prayer seeking Our Blessed Mother to intercede with God to prevent, protect and heal all nationwide and globally and to rid the world of this devastating virus.

"Let us be compassionate toward anyone who has contracted the virus and help direct the person to the health authorities and caregivers to restore the person's health and voluntarily seek treatment ourselves on the slightest suspicion of being infected by it," CBCSL president Bishop Winston S. Fernando and Secretary J.D. Anthony said in a statement on March 18. "Covid-19 is not a respecter of personages and no one is spared."

Bishops called on all sectors of society to give their fullest cooperation to arrest the prevailing situation and appreciated the medical attention and health care provided to prevent the virus from spreading and the treatment given during quarantine.

The government announced that all liquor shops in the country must remain closed when the curfew is lifted. Mahinda Deshapriya, chairman of the Election Commission, said the general election scheduled for April 25 has been indefinitely postponed due to the pandemic. The deadline for accepting nominations for the parliamentary election ended on March 19. A pastor who conducted a service in Jaffna on March 15 tested positive for the coronavirus after returning to Switzerland. The army, police and health officers are searching for 150 devotees who attended his service.

The Northern Province Governor's Office and health officials have called for all those who attended the service to be placed in quarantine as soon as possible. Anglican Bishop of Colombo Dhiloraj Canagasabey and Bishop of Kurunegala Keerthisiri Fernando urged the suspension of common worship on Sundays until further notice to cooperate with the state to mitigate the outbreak. "We urge you to keep your churches open for people to attend in small numbers at their discretion for private prayer if they wish to do so," the bishops said in a statement on Sunday.

The clerics requested the public take extra precautions as recommended by the Public Health Department to mitigate the crisis until it is brought under control. No deaths have been reported in Sri Lanka but 222 people are in hospitals under observation or receiving treatment.

-UCAN

In Brief

Com Bank ready to help

A top official said the Commercial Bank, the country's largest private lender is ready to support borrowers whose cash-flows would be hit in a worse than average disruption from the COVID-19 Coronavirus pandemic. This follows President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's call to halt collections of working capital loans for six months.

Police say sorry

The police department yesterday (24) apologized to a woman whose photograph appeared in a list released by the authorities on Monday (23) featuring a group of people it said had arrived in the country earlier in the month but had not gone into quarantine. Deraniyagala Shirani Peries called the police from France yesterday and protested that her picture has appeared on the list.

People's Bank prioritizes salaries

People's Bank Chairman Sujewa Rajapaksa has said the State-run bank is funding the country's energy utilities and key state enterprises, giving priority to salaries and keeping cash flowing with the help of over 1,000 cash deposit machines and automated teller.

Ex-Air Force Chief is now Governor

Former Sri Lanka Air Force Commander Roshan Goonetilleke was appointed Governor of the Western Province yesterday (24) He was sworn in before President Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

Air Force not spraying disinfectant

The Sri Lanka Air Force (SLAF) said there was no move to spray disinfectants from the air and dismissed social media reports about helicopters being used to spray disinfectants as false.

REALITY CHECK

By Mohammed Al-Wafi and Shatha Yaish

Hand-washing

A luxury millions of Yemenis can't afford

AL HAJJAH/DUBAI -Hand-washing to combat the spread of coronavirus is the order of the day, but it's an unaffordable luxury for millions in war-ravaged Yemen where clean water is dangerously scarce.

Yemen's broken healthcare system has yet to register any cases of the disease, but if the pandemic does hit, the impact will be unimaginable in a country where the long conflict has created what the UN calls the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

Five years after a Saudi-led military coalition intervened in Yemen to support the government against the Iran-backed Huthi rebels, some 80% of the population of 30 million is in need of aid.

Doctors Without Borders (MSF) said it was concerned many Yemenis have no access even to clean water or soap.

"We are extremely worried," Caroline Seguin, MSF's head of programmes in Yemen, Iraq and Jordan, told AFP. "We can recommend they wash their hands, but what if they don't have anything to wash with?"

Nearly 18 million people, including 9.2 million children, do not have regular access to safe water, according to UNICEF, and only a third of the population has access to piped supplies.

Eleven-year-old Mohammed's family, who live in the rebel-controlled Hajja province north of the capital Sanaa, are among those for whom water does not come out of a tap.

He and his sister leave their home on the back of a donkey every morning to fill up containers from a murky well about three kilometres (two miles) from their home.

"I get the donkey ready... and then head out at 7:30am, and I keep going back and forth until 10am," Mohammed told AFP.

The two children wait for their turn to fill up plastic canisters with a dirty hose.

Their family has no choice but to drink the contaminated water and use it for cooking.

Yemen suffered one of its worst ever outbreaks of cholera in 2017 and Oxfam said yesterday (24) that the forthcoming rainy season could see another deadly episode that would be compounded by the new virus threat.

"Flights into and out of the country have been stopped, restricting movement for some aid workers responding to the humanitarian crisis," it said in a statement.

Only half the health centres in the country are functioning, and even those that are open face severe shortages of medicines, equipment and staff, it said.

"After five years of death, disease and displacement and in the face of a rising threat from a global pandemic, Yemenis desperately need all warring parties to agree to an immediate countrywide ceasefire," Oxfam's country director Muhsin Siddiquey said in a statement.

Tens of thousands of people -- most of them civilians -- have been killed since March 2015 when the Saudi-led coalition intervened in the war that has pushed the country to the brink of famine. The conflict, which shows no signs of abating, has crippled the country's healthcare system and paved the way for the spread of diseases.

Mohammed Aqil, a doctor at Al-Jaada medical centre in Hajja, said the clinic deals with around 300 patients a day.

"Most of the cases are linked to diseases transmitted by consuming water that is not safe for drinking," he told AFP.

MSF said that given the state of the healthcare system, it would be "a disaster" if the new coronavirus reached Yemen, long the Arabian Peninsula's poorest nation.

"Frequently washing hands is the most effective way to protect against the coronavirus, but what will more than half the Yemeni people who don't have access to safe water do," the International Committee of the Red Cross in Yemen tweeted on Sunday (22).

More than 16,000 deaths have been recorded worldwide since the virus first emerged in December, according to an AFP tally, most of them in Europe.

In Sanaa, the Iran-backed Huthi insurgents who control the capital and large parts of the north have suspended schools and flights as cases of the virus in nearby countries soar.

- Agence France-Presse



-Adam Dean/The New York Times

A soldier and medical worker screen body temperatures of arriving passengers at Changi Airport in Singapore, Feb 10. As countries around the world race to contain the coronavirus pandemic, many are deploying digital surveillance tools as a means to exert social control, even turning security agency technologies on their own civilians.

As coronavirus surveillance escalates, personal privacy plummets

SOUTH KOREA - In South Korea, government agencies are harnessing surveillance-camera footage, smartphone location data and credit card purchase records to help trace the recent movements of coronavirus patients and establish virus transmission chains.

In Lombardy, Italy, authorities are analyzing location data transmitted by citizens' mobile phones to determine how many people are obeying a government lockdown order and the typical distances they move every day. About 40% are moving around "too much," an official recently said.

In Israel, the country's internal security agency is poised to start using a cache of mobile phone location data -- originally intended for counterterrorism operations -- to try to pinpoint citizens who may have been exposed to the virus.

As countries around the world race to contain the pandemic, many are deploying digital surveillance tools as a means to exert social control, even turning security agency technologies on their own civilians. Health and law enforcement authorities are understandably eager to employ every tool at their disposal to try to hinder the virus -- even as the surveillance efforts threaten to alter the precarious balance between public safety and personal privacy on a global scale.

Yet ratcheting up surveillance to combat the pandemic now could permanently open the doors to more invasive forms of snooping later. It is a lesson Americans learned after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, civil liberties experts say.

Nearly two decades later, law enforcement agencies have access to higher-powered surveillance systems, like fine-grained location tracking and facial recognition -- technologies that may be repurposed to further political agendas like anti-immigration policies. Civil liberties experts warn that the public has little recourse to challenge these digital exercises of state power.

"We could so easily end up in a situation where we empower local, state or federal government to take measures in response to this pandemic that fundamentally change the scope of American civil rights," said Albert Fox Cahn, executive director of the Surveillance Technology Oversight Project, a non-profit organization in Manhattan.

As an example, he pointed to a law enacted by New York State this month that gives Gov. Andrew Cuomo unlimited authority to rule by executive order during state crises like pandemics and hurricanes. The law allows him to issue emergency response directives that could overrule any local regulations.

Increased surveillance and health data disclosures have also drastically eroded people's ability to keep their health status private.

This month, Australia's health minister publicly chastised a doctor whom she accused of treating patients while experiencing symptoms of the virus -- essentially outing him by naming the small clinic in Victoria where he worked with a handful of other physicians.

But in emergencies like pandemics, privacy must be weighed against other considerations, like saving lives, said Mila Romanoff, data and governance lead for United Nations Global Pulse, a U.N. program that has studied using data to improve emergency responses to epidemics like Ebola and dengue fever.

"We need to have a framework that would allow companies and public authorities to cooperate, to enable proper response for the public good," Romanoff said. To reduce the risk that coronavirus surveillance efforts might violate people's privacy, she said, governments and companies should limit the collection and use of data to only what is needed. "The challenge is," she added, "how much data is enough?"

The fast pace of the pandemic, however, is prompting governments to put in place a patchwork of digital surveillance measures in the name of their own interests, with little international coordination on how appropriate or effective they are.

In hundreds of cities in China, the government is requiring citizens to use software on their phones that automatically classifies each person with a color code -- red, yellow or green -- indicating contagion risk. The software determines which people should be quarantined or permitted to enter public places like subways. But officials have not explained how the system makes such decisions, and citizens have felt powerless to challenge it.

In Singapore, the Ministry of Health has posted information online about each coronavirus patient, often in

stunning detail, including relationships to other patients. The idea is to warn individuals who may have crossed paths with them, as well as alert the public to potentially infected locations. "Case 219 is a 30-year-old male," says one entry on the Health Ministry's site, who worked at the "Sengkang Fire Station (50 Buangkok Drive)," is "in an isolation room at Sengkang General Hospital" and "is a family member of Case 236."

In the United States, the White House recently spoke with Google, Facebook and other tech companies about potentially using aggregated location data captured from Americans' mobile phones for public health surveillance of the virus. Several members of Congress subsequently wrote a letter urging President Donald Trump and Vice President Mike Pence to protect any virus-related data that companies collected from Americans.

The digital dictates may enable governments to exert more social control and enforce social distancing during the pandemic. They also raise questions about when surveillance may go too far.

In January, South Korea's government began posting detailed location histories on each person who tested positive for the coronavirus. The site has included a wealth of information -- such as details about when people left for work, whether they wore masks in the subway, the name of the stations where they changed trains, the massage parlors and karaoke bars they frequented and the names of the clinics where they were tested for the virus.

In South Korea's highly wired society, however, internet mobs exploited patient data disclosed by the government site to identify people by name and hound them.

As other countries increase surveillance, South Korea had an unusual reaction. Concerned that privacy invasions might discourage citizens from getting tested for the virus, health officials announced this month that they would refine their data-sharing guidelines to minimize patient risk.

"We will balance the value of protecting individual human rights and privacy and the value of upholding public interest in preventing mass infections," said Jung Eun-kyeong, director of South Korea's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

-New York Times

By Jane E. Brody

The loneliness of social distancing

Two years ago, when Dr. Vivek H. Murthy, the former surgeon general of the United States, started researching his book, 'Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World', he never anticipated how relevant the topic would be now that it is about to be published.

The coronavirus pandemic and resulting advice -- stay home if at all possible, avoid convening with others and refrain from close contacts even on the street -- has intensified the harm inflicted by factors that already isolate people and rendered many of the antidotes to isolation moot.

As Murthy points out, we're wired for human connection that can counter the damaging biological effects of stress and anxiety. Yet, face-to-face relationships have already been undermined by electronic "conversations" during which human needs and feelings are less honestly conveyed. We may talk more to one another's answering machines than we do to one another.

According to a new report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, social isolation has been linked to a 50% increased risk of dementia, a 29% increased risk of heart disease and a 32% increased risk of stroke.

We, after all, evolved as a species that thrives on human connection and cooperation. Put these on hold and there's an inevitable price to pay. And it's not just the elderly who are likely to pay it, though many older people were already missing meaningful human contact long before the coronavirus struck. The damaging effects of loneliness on health are not restricted to any age or ethnic group. Any one of us can suffer the consequences, as Murthy says he experienced as a child who was shy and shunned by his age-mates.

Based on a variety of studies, Murthy reports, the impact of social isolation and loneliness on longevity equals that of smoking 15 cigarettes a day and exceeds the risks associated with obesity, excessive alcohol consumption and lack of exercise. Advice to avoid COVID-19 through social distancing can, for many people, increase the risk of physical and emotional harm from inadequate social contact.

My daughter-in-law emphasized my need to be strict about protective guidelines, not just for my own health, but to prevent a domino effect that could jeopardize the lives of more fragile members of my extended family. There is no room for selfishness during a deadly pandemic.

All of which raises the question: What can people do to minimize the risk of being lonely when cut off from direct human contact? Murthy explains that loneliness is distinct from solitude: "Loneliness is the subjective feeling that you're lacking the social connections you need -- the feeling of closeness, trust and affection of genuine friends, loved ones and community."

And within that definition lie important clues to countering the effects of physical isolation that is now needed to slow the spread of this deadly and likely uncontrollable infection. Our best hope at the moment is to keep the most vulnerable people safe and our medical facilities and personnel from being overwhelmed by those who may become dangerously ill.

So far, this disaster has brought out the best in people in many communities. My younger neighbours, for example, have offered to help if I need anything -- food, medication, whatever. A block away, emails and phone numbers were shared so that someone who needs help can call on a neighbour without leaving home.

I just hope magnanimous feelings survive what are likely to be prolonged restrictions on personal freedom, especially now that children are home 24/7 and most venues outside the home for release and entertainment -- cultural, physical and emotional -- have been shut down. Critically important is maintaining soul-restoring human connections.

Michele Weiner-Davis, a relationship expert in Boulder, Colorado, told me, "Offering to help others, reaching out, adopting the Buddhist perspective of focusing on the here and now, can inoculate a person against anxiety."

A persistent refrain from everyone I asked: If you do nothing else, "Pick up the phone, call someone and ask how they're doing," Weiner-Davis said. Stacy Torres, a sociologist at the University of California, San Francisco, concurred: "The old-fashioned telephone is very important. You can hear something in a person's voice that can't be detected in an email."

Last week, I devoted an entire day to talking on the phone with distant friends, catching up on their lives and sending verbal hugs. I ended the day feeling connected and renewed. This virus has been a valuable reminder of what I was missing.

Murthy said it didn't have to be a long conversation. "It's not about finding more time, it's about making the time we have available better quality," he said. "Eliminate distractions when talking -- no multitasking. A five-minute conversation when you have someone's full attention can make a big difference to how a person feels. The sound and tone of a person's voice provide rich input into how someone is doing. Videoconferencing is even better. It most replicates direct contact because you can actually see each other."

"If I had a credo for my book, it would be 'People First,'" he said. "Too many people worship false gods -- wealth, reputation, power -- that are not more important than the people in our lives. Relationships are what make our lives worth living."

Torres also urged people to "do whatever you can do to connect with people while staying within recommended guidelines, like donating to soup kitchens not just money for the food but for the person who delivers it. We've got to do anything we can do remotely or from 6 feet away."

-New York Times

By Neil Vigdor

Man fatally poisons himself while self-medicating for coronavirus

PHOENIX - An Arizona man died and his wife was hospitalized after officials said they treated themselves Sunday (22) with a deadly home remedy for the new coronavirus -- a popular fish tank additive that has the same active ingredient as an anti-malaria drug.

The drug, known as chloroquine phosphate or chloroquine, has been bandied about by President Donald Trump during White House briefings on the coronavirus pandemic as a potential "game changer" in the treatment of COVID-19.

The couple, who officials at Banner Health, a hospital system based in Phoenix, said were in their 60s and were from Maricopa County, quickly experienced side effects that included nausea and vomiting. They were not tested for the coronavirus.

The man died from cardiac arrest and his wife was initially listed in critical condition, according to hospital officials, who said Monday (23) that the woman

had been upgraded to stable condition and was expected to make a full recovery. Their names were not released.

Dr. Daniel Brooks, medical director of the Banner Poison and Drug Information Centre, said in an interview Monday night that the couple's attempt to self-medicate was a cautionary tale.

"It's incredibly dangerous and foolish for people to be doing this," he said. "This is not going to be a magic pill for us to get us through this."

Brooks said the couple had read about chloroquine phosphate on the internet, which he said was cluttered with a lot of misinformation about treatments for COVID-19, the disease caused by the new coronavirus. He said the public should rely on authoritative sources such as the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, the World Health Organization and state health officials for medical advice -- not the internet or politicians.

"You need to listen to the scientists,"

he said. "People are panicking and making decisions based on symptoms without being tested."

The woman told NBC News on Monday that she had heard Trump make repeated mentions of chloroquine during recent White House briefings on the coronavirus and that she used chloroquine phosphate to treat her koi fish.

"I saw it sitting on the back shelf and thought, 'Hey, isn't that the stuff they're talking about on TV,'" said the woman, who was not named by NBC.

The White House did not immediately respond to a request for comment Monday night.

During a briefing Friday (20), Trump suggested that two long-used malaria drugs, chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine, could be effective in the treatment of the coronavirus. The drugs are being tested in clinical trials.

At the same news conference, Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, the director of the Na-

tional Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases since 1984, said there had been only anecdotal evidence that the drugs may be effective. As of yet, no drugs have been approved in the United States for the treatment of the coronavirus.

In Nigeria, health officials recently reported some episodes of hospitals treating patients for chloroquine poisoning.

The fish tank additive is used to eliminate algae and to treat the white spot condition commonly known as ich. On eBay, prices for the additive have spiked during the coronavirus pandemic.

Brooks said 85% of people who get the coronavirus would survive with no specific treatment. He said antiviral medications were used only in patients who had tested positive and are critically ill. The medications need to be closely monitored because they can have serious side effects, he said.

-New York Times