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COVID-19 and curfew in Sri Lanka

- In a record spike, 135 individuals were confirmed as COVID-19 positive yesterday (26), taking Sri Lanka's tally of the novel coronavirus infection to 1317. Of the 135, 127 were Kuwait returnees in quarantine and eight were navy personnel. Forty one cases were confirmed on Monday (25). Five hundred and ninety five individuals are receiving treatment, 712 have been deemed completely recovered and 10 have succumbed to the virus.
- The country-wide police curfew in all districts including Colombo and Gampaha is replaced with a six-hour curfew from 10:00 p.m. to 4:00 a.m. until further notice.
- Director General Health Services, Dr. Anil Jasinghe, calls for limiting the number of employees working in State and private institutions, warning the country has not normalized 100% though the government has relaxed curfew.
- The Presidential Task Force to combat COVID-19 proposes airports be reopened for foreign tourists from August 1, as the country is gradually returning to normalcy.
- Four ambulances carrying several COVID-19 patients from the Minneriya quarantine centre to the Homagama Hospital crashes at Kandalanda, Homagama. No injuries are reported.
- Police to take legal action against those who fail to maintain social distancing in public places, including banks and supermarkets.
- The University Grants Commission says universities will be reopened on June 15 to enable final year Medical Faculty students to complete their examinations.

Coronavirus toll

346,296 deaths at 1100 GMT yesterday

PARIS - The novel coronavirus has killed at least 346,296 people since the outbreak first emerged in China last December, according to a tally from official sources compiled by AFP at 1100 GMT yesterday (26).

At least 5,507,700 cases of coronavirus have been registered in 196 countries and territories. Of these, at least 2,176,600 are now considered recovered.

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

Many countries are testing only symptomatic cases or the most serious ones.

The US is the worst-hit country with 98,223 deaths from 1,662,768 cases. At least 379,157 people have been declared recovered.

After the US, the hardest-hit countries are Britain with 36,914 deaths from 261,184 cases, Italy with 32,877 from 230,158 cases, France at 28,457 deaths and 182,942 cases and Spain with 26,834 deaths and 235,400 cases.

Spain on Monday (25) revised down its death toll by 2,000 after it said some fatalities were counted twice or wrongly attributed to the virus.

China - excluding Hong Kong and Macau - has to date declared 4,634 deaths and 82,992 cases. It has 78,277 recovered cases.

Europe overall has 172,890 deaths from 2,048,424 cases, the United States and Canada have 104,860 deaths from 1,748,479 infections, Latin America and the Caribbean 41,590 deaths from 770,283 cases, Asia 14,478 deaths from 464,814 cases, the Middle East 8,871 deaths from 351,114 cases, Africa 3,477 deaths from 116,099 cases, and Oceania 130 deaths from 8,491 cases.

-AFP



- WAKIL KOHSAR / AFP

Taliban prisoners walk in line during their release from the Bagram prison, next to the US military base in Bagram, some 50 km north of Kabul yesterday (26). Afghan authorities freed hundreds more Taliban prisoners yesterday, as calls grew for the militants to extend a ceasefire on its third and final day. The historic pause in fighting - only the second in nearly 19 years of war - has mostly held across Afghanistan, providing a rare respite from the conflict's grinding violence. Authorities said

they had released about 900 Taliban prisoners across the country yesterday, approximately 600 of them from the notorious Bagram jail. The release is part of a pledge by the Afghan government to free up to 2,000 insurgent prisoners in response to the Taliban's three-day ceasefire offer, which began Sunday (24) to mark the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Fitr. The prisoners had signed written pledges not to return to the battlefield, but freed inmate Qari Mohammadullah vowed to continue fighting

if foreign forces remain. Each former prisoner was given the equivalent of about \$65 in Afghan currency. The buses they had boarded at the prison dropped them in Kabul, where they bid goodbyes to each other and took taxis to their homes. The release of 900 prisoners marked "good progress," Taliban spokesman Suhail Shaheen said on Twitter. He added the group will free a "remarkable" number of Afghan security force personnel, but did not specify when

'Disaster' looms for millions of children as WHO warns of second peak

GENEVA - The coronavirus pandemic will have a "disastrous" impact on children's rights worldwide, making them more vulnerable to forced labour and underage marriage, a rights group has said, as the World Health Organization (WHO) warned of an "immediate second peak" in cases if restrictions were lifted too soon.

Millions of children would fall into extreme poverty because of the outbreak, which has left governments short of money for health and education for the young, Dutch NGO

KidsRights said. "This crisis turns back the clock on years of progress made on the wellbeing of children," said founder and Chairman Marc Dullaert as it launched its annual survey. "Therefore, a strong focus for children's rights is needed more than ever."

The suspension of vaccination campaigns for children also increased the risk of infant mortality, while hundreds of millions of children who normally relied on school meals were being left with no reliable source of daily nutrition.

The annual KidsRights rankings used UN data to measure how countries measure up to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This year's survey - which does not take into account the pandemic - put Iceland, Switzerland and Finland on top, with Chad, Afghanistan and Sierra Leone as the worst-performing countries.

The NGO's warning came as the WHO emergencies head, Dr Mike Ryan, spoke of a potential second wave of infections at any time, especially if measures to halt the first

wave were lifted too soon. He said: "We cannot make assumptions that just because the disease is on the way down now it is going to keep going down and we are going to get in a number of months a second wave."

We may get a second peak in this wave."

Calls for vigilance were echoed as restrictions eased across Europe, Japan lifted its state of emergency, and people in the US marked the start of summer with Memorial Day weekend getaways.

-The Guardian/Agencies

India backs hydroxychloroquine for virus prevention

NEW DELHI - India's top biomedical research body yesterday (26) backed the use of the anti-malarial hydroxychloroquine as a preventive against coronavirus, after the WHO suspended clinical trials of the drug over safety concerns.

The endorsement from the Indian Council of Medical Research came a week after US President Donald Trump said he was taking the drug as a preventative measure.

Observational and case control studies in India showed there were "no major side effects" of taking the drug as a prophylactic, ICMR Director-General Balram Bhargava said.

Cases of nausea, vomiting and heart palpitations were noted, he added.

Last week, the ICMR - which is leading the government's response to the virus - expanded its advisory

for the use of hydroxychloroquine as a preventative measure.

The body said all healthcare workers in hospitals and some frontline personnel could now take the drug for up to several weeks under strict medical supervision.

On Monday (25), the WHO said it was halting testing of the drug as a COVID-19 treatment after studies questioned its safety, including one that found it actually increased the risk of death.

Under India's clinical guidelines for coronavirus treatment, hydroxychloroquine can be administered, but only to patients "with severe disease and requiring ICU management."

India - which accounts for 70% of global production of hydroxychloroquine - yesterday reported 145,380 cases of the virus including 4,167 deaths.

-AFP

UK COVID-19 death toll tops 47,000

As pressure heaps on PM Johnson

LONDON - The United Kingdom's COVID-19 death toll surpassed 47,000 yesterday (26), a dire human cost that could define the premiership of Boris Johnson.

The Office for National Statistics said 42,173 people had died in England and Wales with suspected COVID-19 as of May 15, bringing the UK total to 47,343 - which includes earlier data from Scotland, Northern Ireland, plus recent hospital deaths in England.

A death toll of nearly 50,000 underlined Britain's status as one of the worst-hit countries in a pandemic that has killed at least 345,400 worldwide.

Johnson, already under fire for his handling of the pandemic, has had to defend his top adviser Dominic Cummings who drove 250 miles from London

to access childcare when Britons were being told to stay at home to fight COVID-19.

One Johnson's junior ministers, Douglas Ross, resigned in protest yesterday.

Johnson has stood by Cummings, saying the aide had followed the "instincts of every father."

The government says that while it may have made some mistakes it is grappling with the biggest public health crisis since the 1918 influenza outbreak and that it has ensured the health service was not overwhelmed.

Unlike the daily death toll published by the government, yesterday's figures include suspected cases and confirmed cases of COVID-19, the respiratory disease caused by the novel coronavirus.

-Agencies

WHO says

Dutch mink workers may be first known humans infected by animals

GENEVA - The World Health Organization (WHO) said yesterday (26) that Dutch workers apparently infected with the coronavirus by minks could be the first known cases of animal-to-human transmission.

The WHO said it was in close contact with Dutch researchers investigating three cases where the virus appears to have been passed to humans from minks.

"This would be the first known cases of animal-to-human transmission," the UN health agency told AFP in an email.

"But we are still collecting and reviewing more data to understand if animals and pets can spread the disease," it said.

Dutch Agriculture Minister Carola Schouten said Monday

(25) a second worker had likely contracted COVID-19 on a mink farm, while stressing that the risk of further contagion remained low.

An initial infection was reported last week on one of two farms near the southern city of Eindhoven, where the disease was discovered in April among mink that are bred for their valuable fur.

The infection happened before it was known that the mink were carrying the virus, meaning that workers did not wear protective clothing at the time. The health ministry said that three people on the farm tested positive for the virus, but said that it remained unclear if more than one of the cases had come directly from a mink.

-AFP

Trending News

Germany: The country extends social distancing rules aimed at containing the spread of the coronavirus to June 29.

France: President Emmanuel Macron announces an 8-billion euro plan to revive the country's auto industry by making it the European leader in electric cars.

USA: The White House says President Donald Trump is "displeased" with China's proposed crackdown in Hong Kong and has doubts over the territory's future as a global financial centre if it goes ahead.

Americas: International health authorities express concern over signs the spread of the new coronavirus is "still accelerating" in Brazil, Peru and Chile.

Brazil: Police raid the Rio de Janeiro state governor's official residence as part of an investigation into the alleged embezzlement of funds to build field hospitals for coronavirus patients.

Social media: YouTube says it is investigating the removal of comments critical of the Chinese Communist Party from the video-sharing

platform, saying the filtering appeared to be "an error."

Qatar: Amnesty International warns a security flaw in the controversial mandatory coronavirus contact tracing app has exposed sensitive information of more than one million users.

Russia: Officials say at least 101 medics have died from coronavirus in the first such official announcement, while an online tally compiled by doctors gives a far higher figure.

Spain: The government says it will hold 10 days of official mourn-

ing for victims of the coronavirus epidemic that has so far claimed more than 27,000 lives.

Saudi Arabia: The kingdom says it will end its nationwide coronavirus curfew from June 21, except in the holy city of Mecca, after more than two months of stringent curbs.

Palestine: Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity, built on the spot where Christians believe Jesus was born, reopens more than two months after closing in the face of the coronavirus.

Quote for Today

Courage is fear holding on a minute longer.

-George S. Patton

Word for Today

Syncope [singkuhpeyt, sin] - verb (used with object) - to place (the accents) on beats that are normally unaccented

Today in History

1999 - The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia indicts Slobodan Milošević and four others for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Kosovo

Today is...

Cellophane Tape Day

A day to come up with something new and creative for this amazing adhesive!

HOT TOPICS

By Stephen Castle and Mark Landler

Sorry not sorry

Dominic Cummings' unapologetic explanation for UK lockdown breach

LONDON - Prime Minister Boris Johnson took a breathtaking gamble with his own popularity Monday (25), allowing his closest aide to go public with a detailed, yet stubbornly unapologetic, explanation for making a 260-mile journey that broke lockdown rules and ignited a political firestorm in Britain.

In an extraordinary hour-long session with reporters, the aide, Dominic Cummings, admitted to travelling from London to his parents' home in Durham in late March while showing symptoms of the coronavirus, and making a second outing in the region while there, confirming reports that have consumed the British news media for three days.

It was a riveting tableau: a powerful, unelected political adviser seated in shirt sleeves at a table in the garden behind 10 Downing Street, where British prime ministers have played host to visiting heads of state, offering his version of a deeply personal story that has mushroomed into a national scandal. For many Britons, it was the first time they had heard Cummings speak, let alone offer them a glimpse into his most intimate deliberations. He recounted rushing home from Downing Street in March to find his wife ill with symptoms of the coronavirus and of becoming fearful that they might not be able to care for their 4-year-old son.

And yet there were also signs of the Cummings all too familiar to followers of British politics: the brusque, Svengali-like figure who has become a staple of the British press. He was unrepentant, defensive, and quick to shift the blame to the news media, accusing it of reporting falsely about him, not just in this episode, but over his entire career.

Looking sombre, but showing little contrition, Cummings explained he had left London to secure care for his son in the event that both he and his wife were incapacitated by the coronavirus. Because of his high media profile, he said, he had been "subject to threats and violence" at his home.

"I'm not surprised many people are very angry," Cummings said. "I don't regret what I did; I think what I did was reasonable in these circumstances."

By now, most prime ministers might have cut loose an aide whose actions prompted accusations of hypocrisy and muddled the government's messaging as it struggles to deal with a pandemic. But despite the fierce political backlash, Johnson has offered his steadfast support for Cummings, illustrating what analysts say is the prime minister's deep reliance on his mercurial, combative adviser.

Around an hour after Cummings spoke, Johnson tried to put the furor behind him by announcing new measures to ease the lockdown. Among other steps, outdoor markets and car dealerships will be allowed to open June 1; department stores and small shops will follow June 15. Still, the prime minister said he regretted the anger the Cummings episode had stirred up and noted that he did not know in advance about his plans.

"My conclusion is that he acted reasonably," Johnson said, adding that "people will have to make their minds up."

It was not clear whether Cummings' account would avert pressure for his resignation.

While he offered a heartfelt portrayal of a family under pressure, he also admitted to having made a visit to a location more than 20 miles from the house where he stayed in Durham — another apparent breach of guidelines. Britons were instructed to leave their homes only for a daily walk or run, but told not to drive anywhere for recreation.

In the part of his account that might prove least convincing for many Britons, Cummings explained that he had made the trip — to Castle Barnard, a half-hour drive from Durham — to test whether his eyesight, which he said had been impaired by the illness, was good enough for him to make the 5-hour drive back to London. That raised questions about why he was behind the wheel at all.

When Johnson was pressed on his aide's explanation, he said he had suffered his own eyesight problems since recovering from the virus.

Perhaps predictably, Cummings' performance did not satisfy his critics.

"The British people were looking for at least an apology from Dominic Cummings for breaking the lockdown," the opposition Labour Party said in a statement. "They got none. The message from this government is clear: It's one rule for Boris Johnson's closest adviser, another for everybody else."

-New York Times

Namibia culls elephants to protect crops

WINDHOEK - Namibia has killed 10 elephants over the past two months to prevent the freely roaming animals from trampling crops, the environment ministry said yesterday (26).

The southern African country is home to over 24,000 elephants, mostly concentrated in and around national parks near the northern border with Angola.

The pachyderms are not fenced in and sometimes pose a threat to local communities, trampling through fields and occasionally attacking villagers. Environment ministry spokesman Romeo Muyunda said 10 elephants had been culled since April in the northern regions of Kavango West, Omusati and Otjozondjupa.

"This is something we are doing because we have no alternative," Muyunda told AFP.

"Living with such animals living outside parks comes at a cost during harvesting seasons," Muyunda explained that only "problem animals" were being targeted.

"We are still observing whether there are any problem animals in some of the other regions that would warrant us to put them down," he added. The culled elephant meat was distributed among local communities, while their tusks were added to the government's ivory stocks.

-AFP



-Vishal Bhatnagar / AFP

A resident tries to fend off swarms of locusts from a mango tree in a residential area of Jaipur in the Indian state of Rajasthan on Monday (25). Authorities were combating swarms of desert locusts that have been rampaging across parts of western and central India in the nation's worst pest infestation in nearly three decades, an official said.

By Soutik Biswas

India, Pakistan fighting locusts amid COVID-19 pandemic

NEW DELHI - An invasion by desert locusts has hit large swathes of India and Pakistan in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic.

Large and aggressive swarms of these crop-devouring short-horned insects have invaded more than two dozen districts covering more than 50,000 hectares of desert areas of western India. Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat are the worst affected states.

In neighbouring Pakistan, authorities declared a nationwide emergency in February, saying locust numbers were the worst in more than two decades. Local reports say that farmers are fighting the "worst locust plague in nearly three decades" and the swarms were decimating crops and sending prices of food soaring.

Some 38% of Pakistan's area spread over the provinces of Balochistan, Sindh and Punjab are "breeding grounds" for locusts, according to a report by the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) of the United Nations.

Relations between the two hostile nuclear-armed neighbours have been frozen for years. But this hasn't come in the way of India and Pakistan working closely to fight these migratory insects, say officials.

There have been some nine Skype meetings between the two sides since April, which plant-protection officials from Afghanistan and Iran have also joined, a senior Indian official told me.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the two sides would meet physically on the border. They held five border meetings on locust control during 2017-2018.

"We are battling a major locust attack from across the border. This is

the biggest invasion in nearly three decades. The swarms are very big and they have migrated from across the border after breeding a month earlier than we were expecting," KL Gurjar, deputy director of India's Locust Warning Organization, said.

The swarms flew across the border around April 30, and they are still active in five districts of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh.

Each of these one-square-kilometre swarms contains up to 40 million insects and they travel fast, sometimes up to 400km (248 miles) in a day, officials say.

"We are lucky that there is no crop in the fields now. But the locusts eat up all the green vegetation, leaves, flowers, fruits, seeds and plants," Gurjar said. An average small locust swarm, say officials, can eat as much food in a day as about 2,500 people.

The COVID-19 pandemic is posing fresh challenges for some 100 odd workers who are battling the insects, using vehicle-mounted sprayers, pesticides and drones in the searing desert heat.

They are staying in the villages, where they are being given foods by locals, and going out at night to hunt down the insects in face masks and wearing some basic protective clothing. "They have migrated here after breeding across the border. It is a severe attack," Om Prakash, a plant-protection officer, who works in Rajasthan state.

India has suffered from waves of locust invasions over the years: 25 locust plagues and upsurges were recorded between 1964 and 1997. The colonial government set up a locust warning organization in 1939 in Karachi, now

in Pakistan, after a series of locust attacks. India set up a separate surveillance organization in 1946.

If not controlled, desert locusts can damage food supplies and cause famine. Some 45 million sq km of land in 90 countries are potentially prone or under the threat of invasion by the desert locust, according to the FAO.

A second wave of a locust attack has also hit East Africa. Africa's second most populous state, Ethiopia - along with regional economic powerhouse Kenya and politically unstable Somalia - are among countries worst hit.

The UN estimates the swarms could be up to 20 times bigger than during the first invasion - and they could become 400 times bigger by June. The World Bank has approved \$500m (£409m) in grants and low-interest loans to help countries in East Africa and the Middle East cope with the crop loss after the attacks.

According to the UN, the current infestations can be traced back to the cyclone season of 2018-19 that brought heavy rains to the Arabian Peninsula and allowed at least three generations of "unprecedented breeding" that went undetected. Swarms have since spread out into South Asia and East Africa.

India, clearly, needs to be watchful in the months ahead. "We need to be alert and anticipate where this is going next."

The situation is all the more alarming as it comes at a time when the affected states are already reeling under COVID-19 and the ongoing heatwave," says Anshu Sharma of Sustainable Environment and Ecological Development Society, a non-profit disaster management organization.

-BBC

By Emma Farge

As COVID spreads

Child labour, marriages on rise in Yemen

GENEVA - The UN refugee agency said yesterday (26) its work in Yemen was near a "potential breaking point" as coronavirus spreads in the war-damaged country, with rising numbers of families resorting to begging, child labour and marrying of children.

Around 80% of Yemen's malnourished population relies on humanitarian assistance, making it the world's biggest humanitarian crisis even before coronavirus.

Last week, the United Nations said its health care system "has in effect collapsed," with the virus thought to be spreading throughout the country, and appealed for urgent funding.

"We are reaching a potential breaking point in our programmes where if we don't receive further funding soon, many of our programmes and particularly our cash assistance programmes

to internally displaced Yemenis may have to stop," said Charlie Yaxley, UNHCR spokesman, at a virtual briefing.

"We are seeing a growing number of families resorting to harmful coping mechanisms such as begging, child labour and marrying of children to survive," he added.

UNHCR provides cash assistance programmes to some 1 million people who are internally displaced and rely on the money for food, medicines and shelter, he said.

The country, whose population has among the world's lowest immunity levels to disease, is divided between the Saudi-backed government based in Aden and its foe, the Iran-aligned Houthi group, in the north.

Saudi Arabia, leader of a military coalition fighting the Houthis, and the United Nations are due to co-host

a virtual pledging conference on June 2. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said on Tuesday it had received around 15 percent of the funding required for the \$3.38 billion 2020 Humanitarian Response Plan for Yemen with the United States the top donor.

"The humanitarian situation in Yemen could spin out of control as COVID-19 threatens a population already weakened by years of conflict," World Food Program (WFP) spokeswoman Elizabeth Byrs said at the same briefing, saying the pandemic was threatening food imports.

"WFP expects coronavirus to push many more children in Yemen into acute malnutrition," she added, saying over two million children were already suffering from it.

-Agencies

By Julie Turkewitz

A celebration of oil

Gasoline-starved Venezuela celebrates arrival of tankers from Iran

BOGOTÁ - An oil tanker called 'Fortune' has sailed into Venezuela from Iran, the first of five ships expected to arrive in a nation so starved of gasoline that the docking of a single tanker was hailed on Monday (25) by government officials as a victory.

The move represented a deepening of economic relations between Venezuela and Iran, two pariah states run by authoritarian leaders subject to punishing sanctions by the United States government. Representatives of both nations cast the transaction as a sign of strength.

"Thanks Iran," Venezuela's leader, Nicolás Maduro, tweeted on Sunday (24), adding that amid US opposition

"only the brotherhood of free peoples will save us."

A spokeswoman for the US State Department, Morgan Ortogus, criticized the move, accusing the Maduro government of being a "criminal organization" that used illegally obtained gold to purchase fuel from Tehran. But she did not say whether the US would attempt to block the shipments, or if it would respond with further sanctions on either nation.

"Venezuelans need free and fair presidential elections leading to democracy and economic recovery," she said, "not Maduro's expensive deals." Risa Grais-Targow, a Venezuela ana-

lyst at the Eurasia Group, a political risk consulting firm, said that the oil shipment highlighted the increasingly parallel economic and political goals of the two nations, as well as the US government's increasingly limited options to obstruct their relationship.

Venezuela needs gasoline and has gold. Iran has oil but needs cash. Both Venezuela and Iran are eager to punch back at the Trump administration.

And the US government, distracted by the coronavirus pandemic and having already issued harsh sanctions, is left with few retaliatory options beyond military intervention.

-New York Times

By Raymond Zhong

Stirring privacy fears

China's virus apps to outlast the outbreak

BEIJING - At the height of China's coronavirus outbreak, officials made quick use of the fancy tracking devices in everybody's pockets — their smartphones — to identify and isolate people who might be spreading the illness.

Months later, China's official statistics suggest that the worst of the epidemic has passed there, but the government's monitoring apps are hardly fading into obsolescence. Instead, they are tipping toward becoming a permanent fixture of everyday life, one with potential to be used in troubling and invasive ways.

While the technology has doubtless helped many workers and employers get back to their lives, it has also prompted concern in China, where people are increasingly protective of their digital privacy. Companies and government agencies in China have a mixed record on keeping personal information safe from hacks and leaks. Authorities have also taken an expansive view of using high-tech surveillance tools in the name of public well-being.

The government's virus-tracking software has been collecting information, including location data, on people in hundreds of cities across China. But authorities have set few limits on how that data can be used. And now, officials in some places are loading their apps with new features, hoping the software will live on as more than just an emergency measure.

Zhou Jiangyong, Communist Party secretary of the eastern tech hub of Hangzhou, said this month that the city's app should be an "intimate health guardian" for residents, one that is used often and "loved so much that you cannot bear to part with it," according to an official announcement.

Governments worldwide are trying to balance public health and personal privacy as they pull out the stops to protect their people from the virus. In China, however, the worry is not just about potential snooping.

The country's leaders have long sought to harness vast troves of digital information to govern their sprawling, sometimes unruly nation more efficiently. But when computer systems have so much authority over people's lives, software bugs and inaccurate data can have big real-world consequences. It is also far from clear that citizens are comfortable with their government knowing so much about them, even when the aim is efficiency and convenience.

"Epidemic prevention and control needs the support of big data technology, but this does not mean agencies and individuals can randomly collect citizens' information by borrowing the name of prevention and control," Li Sihui, a researcher at Huazhong University of Science and Technology in Wuhan, wrote in a recent commentary.

People in China sign up for the virus-tracking system by submitting their personal information, recent travel and health status in one of a swath of apps. The software uses this and other data to assign a color code — green, yellow or red — that indicates whether the holder is an infection risk. Workers posted outside subways, offices and malls stop anyone without a green code from entering.

Authorities have never explained in detail how the system decides the colour of someone's code, which has caused bewilderment among people who have received yellow or red ones without understanding why. The New York Times reported in March that one widely used piece of health code software collected location data and appeared to send it to the police, though it is unclear how the information was used.

In Hangzhou, where the system was pioneered, officials are exploring expanding the health code to rank citizens with a "personal health index," according to a post last week on an official social media account. It is not clear how the ranking would be used. But a graphic in the post shows users receiving a 0-100 score based on how much they sleep, how many steps they take, how much they smoke and drink and other unspecified metrics.

The backlash was swift. "Doesn't this brazenly violate privacy to surveil and discriminate against unhealthy people?" Wang Xin, a novelist, wrote on the social platform Weibo, where he has 2.5 million followers.

Chinese cities are now trying different ways of keeping residents glued to their virus apps. Shanghai wants its app to become a digital assistant for accessing local services of all kinds, not just medical ones. In the inland city of Xining, the software unlocks coupons to local stores as a way to boost the economy.

In Hangzhou, authorities in April began linking the city's app to citizens' medical records. This has enabled residents to schedule hospital visits using the app. A document from the city government also outlines situations in which people's codes could be scanned to receive a readout of their overall health. When seeing a doctor, for instance. Or when evaluating workers for jobs, like being a driver, that require physical fitness. Even when monitoring crowds at large gatherings.

Such readily accessible information could enable discrimination, however. Insurers could raise rates for people with red or yellow codes. Employers could deny jobs or promotions.

China's internet regulator in February issued guidelines barring personal information collected to fight the epidemic from being used for other purposes. But it is not clear whether the same stricture would bind apps, like Hangzhou's, that were created to combat the virus but then morphed into a more general tool.

Neither the internet regulator nor Hangzhou health officials responded to requests for comment.

In one county in Zhejiang province, where Hangzhou is the capital, officials are extending the health code concept beyond public health, a possible sign of where this experiment in digitized social control might lead.

Recently, Communist Party officers in Tiantai County, near the city of Taizhou, were inspired to develop a separate tool they call the "honesty health code," said QiuYinwei, local deputy director of operations.

The code represents party members' degree of uprightness and diligence in carrying out party work.

-New York Times

GLOCAL

Daily Express

Sri Lanka's International Newspaper

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Govt. re-thinks citizens repatriation after COVID-19 spike from Kuwait, Dubai

COLOMBO - Sri Lanka is planning to change the process of repatriating overseas nationals after dozens of arrivals from Kuwait tested positive putting pressure on the health system. The president's office said in a statement the nature of the new system of repatriating will be decided at a meeting scheduled to be held today (27) and flights in June to bring home Sri Lankans will be planned accordingly. Almost all the returnees

from Kuwait were detainees at welfare centres or deportation centres in that country. The president's office said since medical treatment needed to be provided to the infected, it had been decided to revise the repatriation process for Sri Lankans living overseas. However, it emphasized that the government will on humanitarian grounds continue to bring back Sri Lankans in the future, considering their fate in

the event they are not repatriated to Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka had tested 150 out of 462 who came from Kuwait. Of them, 96 had tested positive. More than 300 are yet to be tested. Out of 197 who came from Dubai 20 had tested positive. The head of Sri Lanka's health system Anil Jasinghe said on Monday (5) the pace of arrivals may have to be slowed. **-economynext.com**

Coronavirus cases spike to 135 on Kuwait returnees

COLOMBO - Sri Lanka yesterday (26) confirmed 135 new COVID-19 positive cases, 127 of them returnees from Kuwait, driving up the coronavirus tally to 1317. The other eight are sailors from an infected navy base. One returnee with complications, a 51-year-old woman died on Monday (25) taking Sri Lanka's coronavirus deaths to 10. Five hundred and fifty six persons are in hospitals across the country and 712 have recovered. Sri Lanka has been making progress on containing coronavirus, with no new domestic cases outside of the navy being reported during the last three weeks. Effective yesterday the government relaxed the precautionary curfew in place since March 20, limiting it to six hours from 10:00 p.m. to 4:00 a.m. under further notice **-ENCL**

Inter-district public transport services recommence

Colombo, Gampaha excluded



- J. Sujeewakumar/ENCL

Social distancing forgotten, commuters, most of them State sector employees, clamour to board a train at the Fort Railway station in Colombo, yesterday (26), as authorities eased the two-day 24-hour curfew, in all districts including Colombo and Gampaha, which had been under lockdown for 67 days. The coronavirus curfew first imposed on March 20 was eased yesterday, and turned into a night-time curfew as the authorities announced the spread of the coronavirus was largely under control

COLOMBO - Public transport services between districts recommenced yesterday (26), with strict hygiene guidelines issued for drivers, conductors and passengers. However, no buses were allowed into the Districts of Colombo and Gampaha. The Ministry of Transport in a statement released yesterday, said that while inter-district bus services will be in operation, buses bearing route numbers into the Colombo and Gampaha districts will need to stop at the respective district borders. It said buses coming in from the south via Galle Road will have to stop at Panadura, while buses from Kandy will have to stop at Nittambuwa and buses plying from Anuradhapura will have to stop at Negombo. However, expressway buses carrying State-sector and essential services workers will be permitted to enter Kottawa inside the Colombo district, it added. **-ENCL/economynext.com**

The ministry noted that bus drivers and conductors have been issued strict instructions to limit the number of passengers to the number of seats, and face masks were mandatory for all on board. It also said the new final destination of the bus had to be clearly indicated at the front, and tickets must only be priced up to that point. The bus service will be in operation from 4:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The ministry also noted that the period of validity for public transport licences for buses have been extended to June 30. Trains operating to Colombo, it said, were specifically for State and essential sector workers with reserved seats. The ministry noted that there is a seating capacity of 25,000 for some 125,000 daily commuters. The Railway Department, meanwhile announced that 16,282 passengers took the train to Colombo yesterday morning. **-ENCL/economynext.com**

Airports to open for tourists from August 1

COLOMBO - The government plans to open airports for tourists from August 1, with hotels and restaurants registered with the State tourism agency allowed to operate first, the president's office said yesterday (26). It said the task force fighting coronavirus had proposed to President Gotabaya Rajapaksa at a meeting yesterday that the airports be re-opened for foreign tourists as the country is gradually returning to normal. However, as a first phase, the government would green-light the opening of in-house dining facilities at hotels and restaurants registered under the Tourism Development Authority, the president's

office said, adding that based on its progress, steps will be taken to gradually open unregistered eateries under the assistance and supervision of the Army and Public Health Officers. Sri Lanka has made progress in keeping the coronavirus in check though observers had identified gaps in testing, many of which have been since closed. President Rajapaksa had asked that international and local guidelines be followed in re-opening the country. Sri Lanka closed airports for incoming passengers on March 19. Since then Sri Lankan nationals stranded abroad have been flown back on a phased basis. **-economynext.com**

SJB asks Auditor-General to look into government's 'unauthorized expenses'

COLOMBO - The opposition Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB) has written to the Auditor General pointing out what they term as 'three instances of unconstitutional authorization of public expenditure/ borrowing' by the current government, and asking these expenses be looked into. In a letter that was handed over to the AG Chulantha Wickramaratana yesterday (26), three former MPs from the group cautioned unauthorized borrowing "is not only a serious breach of the public finance provisions of our constitution, it also sullies Sri

Lanka's reputation among creditors." The letter pointed out that Sri Lanka's costs of borrowing have gone up, noting the cavalier attitude towards the rule-of-law, combined with untrustworthy stewardship of public finance, is not only an affront to the tax-payer and to democracy, it may also cause delays in securing urgently needed relief from official creditors - including the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. The former MPs are Dr Harsha de Silva, Niroshan Perera and Sujith Perera. **-eco**

Cricket board suspends player after heroin arrest

COLOMBO - Sri Lanka's cricket board yesterday (26) suspended pace bowler ShehanMadushanka from all forms of the game, two days after he was arrested allegedly in possession of heroin. The right-arm bowler was stopped while driving with another person in a car on Sunday (24) and found to have two grams of the drug, police said. He took a hat-trick against Bangladesh on his one-day international debut in January 2018. He also played two T20

matches against Bangladesh in 2018, but has not played an international since due to injuries. Sri Lanka Cricket secretary Mohan de Silva said they suspended the 25-year-old pending an internal disciplinary inquiry. He was remanded into custody on Monday (25). "We have suspended him with immediate effect and he also cannot take part in any form of the game," de Silva said. **-AFP**

SJB predicts doom for UNP

COLOMBO - The United National Party (UNP) will win fewer votes than the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) at the forthcoming parliamentary election, former MP Ajith P Perera predicted yesterday (26). Claiming that 99% of UNP supporters are now with the Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB) - the breakaway faction of the UNP that supported former opposition leader Sajith Premadasa's presidential bid last year, Perera said SJB supporters will carry the new party back to Sirikotha. Real UNPers who adhere to party principles established by former leaders D. S. Senanayake, Dudley Senanayake, J. R. Jayewardene, and Ranasinghe Premadasa are with the SJB, Perera told reporters yesterday. "Real UNPers are not involved in any kind of theft and have dedicated themselves to serving the country. They value

Sinhala Buddhism while respecting and treating other religions and communities equally," he said. Perera's remarks come in the wake of comments by former MP Ravi Karunanayake on Monday (25), that the exodus of the pro-Sajith Premadasa faction had cleansed the party of anti-Buddhist elements. Challenging UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe and Secretary-General Akila Viraj Kariyawasam, Perera said SJB supporters will ensure they're taken back to UNP headquarters Sirikotha once the Wickremesinghe-Kariyawasam group is defeated at the general election. "Sirikotha is not their private property. It was built by our founders and it belongs to the party membership," he said. "The inheritance of the real UNPers is with the SJB and with our leader Sajith-Premadasa," he added. **-economynext.com**

In Brief



Thondaman passes away
Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) leader and former minister, Arumugam Thondaman (56), passed away yesterday (26). He is reported to have been admitted to the Thalagama Hospital, after a fall at his house, but had died of a heart attack subsequently. Earlier in the day Thondaman met with the newly appointed High Commissioner of India, Gopal Baglay and discussed bilateral cooperation for community development including the ongoing Indian Housing Project in the plantation sector and the landmark Jaffna Cultural Centre. He also posed for what was perhaps his final picture, with Baglay.

Rare black leopard found
A black leopard, classified as rare in Sri Lanka, found trapped and injured in a snare in the Lakshapana Estate in Nallathanniya, Hatton yesterday will be released into the wild after complete recovery, Wildlife Conservation Depart-

ment spokesperson, Hasini Sarachandra said.

Polls date case postponed for today
The Supreme Court yesterday postponed for today (27) further considerations of the Fundamental Rights (FR) petitions filed against the date set by the Elections Commission to hold the general election. Attorney at Law Charitha-Gunaratne, the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA), journalist Victor Ivan, and the Samagi Jana Balavegaya are among those who have filed Fundamental Rights petitions over the date of the election.

SL embassy in UAE reopens
The Embassy of Sri Lanka in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) announced it will reopen for usual embassy services on Thursday (28). The Embassy was temporarily closed on May 21, until further notice after five Sri Lankan staff members tested positive for COVID-19.

Suspicion cast over 35 Seychellois; JVP demands explanation

COLOMBO - The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) on Monday (25) demand the government explain on whose directive 35 Seychellois were brought to Sri Lanka and why they were allegedly prioritized over thousands of Sri Lankans stranded abroad. Former MP Sunil Handunneththi, in a statement said there was a cloud of suspicion hanging over the sudden decision, given the African nation's reputation as an investment destination for "Sri Lankan politicians' black money." Kandeepan Balasupramaniam, DG/East Asia, Ministry of Foreign Relations told reporters on Sunday (24) the Seychelles nationals were flown into Sri Lanka the previous day (23) following a request made by them to utilize medical facilities in the country. According to Balasupramaniam, the visitors had highlighted Sri Lanka's 'superior healthcare sector' as a reason for seeking entry to the country. The decision to fly in the foreigners was made against a backdrop of some 40,000 Sri Lankan expatriate requesting repatriation. According to Handunneththi, there are over 300 Sri Lankan nationals currently stranded in Seychelles itself. "Instead of prioritizing the repatriation of Sri Lankans, why this urgency to bring in foreign nationals to the country?," he questioned, demanding the government and the foreign relations ministry explain who these individuals are, on whose request they were flown in and who approved the decision. Balasupramaniam claimed on Sunday the decision was made solely on humanitarian grounds, taking into account the "healthy bilateral relations" between the two countries. Meanwhile, a statement from the High Commission of Seychelles thanked Sri Lanka for its assistance. "We wish to place on record our gratitude to the Government of Sri Lanka, its Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Health, for enabling the visit of a group of 35 citizens of Seychelles, 24 of who require urgent medical care, of which 11 critical patients are being accompanied by their relatives, for coronary angiography and angioplasty, tetralogy fallout corrective surgery, radiotherapy and chemotherapy, retinal detachment repair and many other high end surgery and interventions," it said. According to the High Commission's statement, the Air Seychelles flight that flew in the purported medical tourists had on its turnaround flight taken back 14 Seychelles nationals who had found themselves stranded in Sri Lanka owing to the COVID-19 lockdown. The High Commission also claimed that 35 the patients had "fulfilled all precautionary measures including the PCR tests in Seychelles and were cleared for foreign travel." "On arrival, they were transferred to a hotel in Wadduwa for paid quarantine and were under the watchful eyes of the Sri Lankan Army and Ministry of Health, thereby complying fully with the quarantine protocol of the Government of Sri Lanka," the High Commission said. Hemas hospital, the statement went on to say, had conducted PCR tests on the 35 patients, all of which turned out negative. This claim could not be independently verified. Seychelles High Commission said on completion of the quarantine period and clearance obtained after a second round of PCR testing for COVID-19, the patients will be admitted to Hemas Hospitals in Thalawathugoda and Wattala to continue their treatment and procedures. Handunneththi, however, demanded the government provide an explanation of the circumstances surrounding the decision. "Seychelles have been a political hot topic in the recent past. There were moves to establish diplomatic relations and even open a Bank of Ceylon (BoC) branch there. Allegations have been made repeatedly that it's a country where Sri Lankan politicians hide or invest their black money," he pointed out. BoC's Seychelles branch was declared open in January 2014. In April 2016, the Committee on Public Enterprises (COPE) called for a report on the performance of the branch. "What is the relationship between the government and these foreigners? There is suspicion that they were providing protection for their chums. We demand that the government explain on whose directive this decision was made," Handunneththi added. Foreign Relations Minister Dinesh Gunawardena could not be reached for comment. **-economynext.com/ENCL**

New Indian HC calls on Dinesh Gunawardena

COLOMBO - The newly accredited Indian High Commissioner to Sri Lanka, Gopal Baglay, paid a courtesy call on Minister of Foreign Relations Dinesh Gunawardena yesterday (26), his first working day as the High Commissioner after presenting Credentials on May 14. Baglay exchanged views on a wide range of bilateral issues with Minister Gunawardena, who assured Sri Lanka's fullest commitment for stronger and deeper cooperation with India. Gunawardena also appreciated the continued exchanges of goodwill that are evident in the midst of the

COVID-19 epidemic. High Commissioner Baglay conveyed Prime Minister Narendra Modi's assurances of closer cooperation with Sri Lanka through his neighbourhood first policy. Both dignitaries agreed to work towards mutually beneficial trade, investment, development and political relations in the post COVID-19 new international environment by enhancing maritime cooperation, security exchanges, ensuring food and health security, enhanced assistance for capacity building and technical cooperation. It was agreed to kick start tourism exchanges based on the ancient foundation of Hindu-Buddhist cultural affinities between the two countries. Also both sides agreed to follow up on the pending Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) and other bilateral instruments. Foreign Secretary Ravinatha Arayasinha and senior officials of the Foreign Relations Ministry were also present during the call. **-ENCL**

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REALITY CHECK

By Andrew Higgins

Putin speaks, officials shrug

... and doctors are caught in the middle

MOSCOW — Assailed by critics as an absentee leader at the start of the coronavirus crisis in Russia, President Vladimir Putin re-emerged with a splash on state television last month to show that he cared and was taking charge.

He promised cash bonuses of up to \$1,100 a month for each doctor, nurse and other "front line" health worker involved in fighting the virus.

But for an all-powerful leader whose every word must be taken as a command, Putin has had a surprisingly hard time making his voice heard.

More than a month after he spoke, the money has yet to materialize for many. Instead, some doctors have received visits from police investigators and prosecutors demanding to know why they complained publicly about not getting their bonuses.

A promise meant to showcase Putin's proudest achievement — the revitalization of the Russian state after the chaos of the 1990s — has sunk into a swamp of recrimination, security service intimidation and bureaucratic buck-passing.

"Is this a joke? Unfortunately, no," Dmitri Drize, a Moscow-based human rights lawyer, wrote last week in a scathing newspaper commentary on the unfolding mess.

He said that neither Russia's foreign foes nor its main opposition leader, Alexei Navalny, "is capable of damaging the image of the state as much as its own managers."

The Kremlin holds more than \$500 billion in various rainy day funds, so Putin has all the money he needs to deliver on his promises. But, in a system rife with corruption, many officials live in permanent fear of being criticized, or worse investigated, for spending state money not included in their previously approved budgets.

So when it came to doling out the cash, they hesitated, took the liberty of making deductions for time that health workers spent on non-coronavirus patients or perhaps skimmed some of the money.

In the southern region of Krasnodar, a widely respected head doctor at a hospital was fired after his staff staged a small protest. He is now under investigation by Russia's equivalent of the FBI for criminal negligence. A doctor in the nearby town of Abinsk who helped organize public complaints over non-payment of Putin's bonus received a letter from the police warning that he faced prosecution for "carrying out extremist activities." Yulia Volkova, a Krasnodar doctor who leads the local branch of Doctors' Alliance, an independent trade union affiliated with Navalny, said medical workers had rejoiced at Putin's promise of extra cash. Now, though, they are "terrified of being investigated" if they complain about the president's orders' falling on deaf ears, she said.

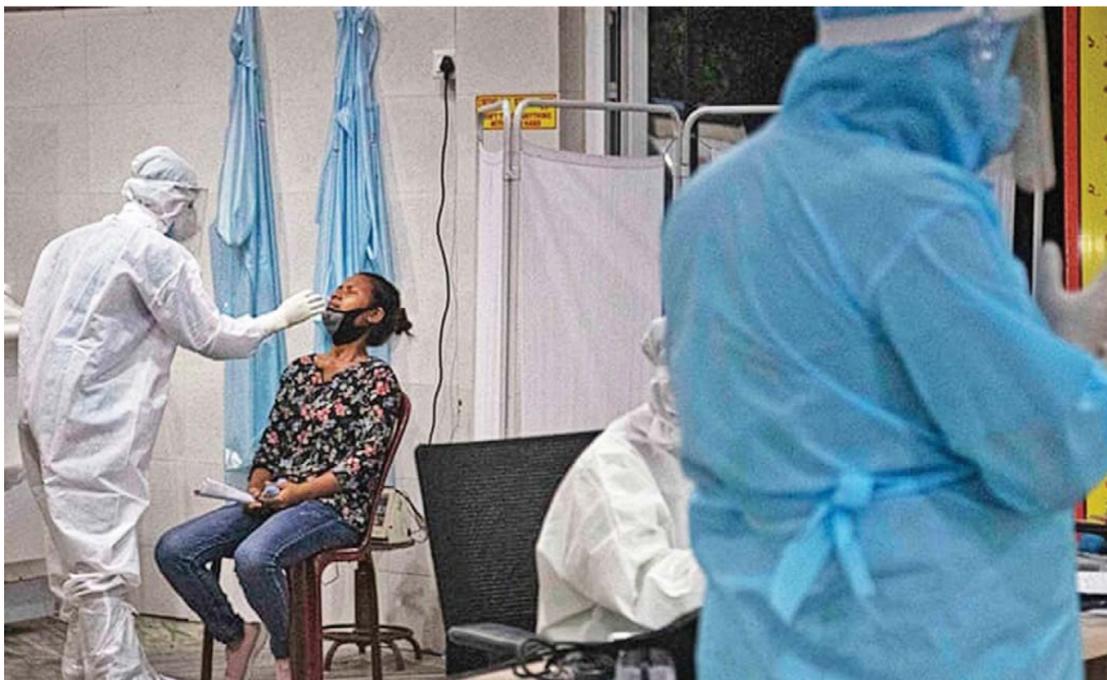
In some cases, however, prosecutors have sided with protesting doctors. The prosecutor's office in Simferopol, the capital of Crimea, annexed by Russia in 2014, said last week that it had investigated complaints of non-payment and found them justified. It ordered local authorities to pay up.

In Nizhny Novgorod, another region where many medical staff have not received the money promised, the regional health minister, David Melik-Husyenov, accused the opposition of using "dirty tricks" to expose the bureaucracy's failures. "Arranging such stories is very immoral," he said. Putin, playing one of his favourite roles as a caring but stern father of the nation undermined by bungling bureaucrats, fumed recently in a teleconference that officials in many places had not acted on his bonus order.

"I gave specific figures for these payments for doctors, for nursing staff, for all medical staff, for ambulance crews and so on," Putin said. Instead, he continued: "They made a bureaucratic mess, counting the number of hours worked on some kind of clock. Did I instruct that you count with a watch or something? No!"

He said earlier that 29 regions had ignored his order and that less than half of medical workers nationwide had received the money he had promised. Ordering officials to get with his program, Putin thundered, "I ask you to keep in mind that I will personally check the situation on this issue in every region of Russia." Much of the blame for unpaid bonuses has now fallen on the staff of Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin, who spent much of this month in the hospital recovering from COVID-19.

—New York Times



—Anupam Nath/AP

While millions of India's poor rely on the public health system, private facilities account for 55% of hospital admissions, according to government data

Hospitals overwhelmed as coronavirus cases explode in India

When Manit Parikh's mother tested positive for the new coronavirus, she was rushed by ambulance to Mumbai's private Lilavati Hospital, but officials told the family no critical-care beds were available.

Five hours and dozens of phone calls later, the family found a bed for her at the private Bombay Hospital. A day later, on May 18, Parikh's 92-year-old diabetic grandfather had breathing difficulties at home and was taken to the city's Breach Candy Hospital, another top private facility, but there were no beds.

"My dad was pleading with them," Parikh recalled. "They said they didn't have a bed, not even a normal bed." Later that day, they found a bed at Bombay Hospital, but his grandfather died hours later. His test results showed he was infected with the virus.

Parikh said he believes the delays contributed to his grandfather's death. Officials at Lilavati and Bombay Hospital declined to speak. Representatives of Breach Candy hospital did not respond to requests for comment.

For years, India's booming private hospitals have taken some of the strain off the country's underfunded and dilapidated public health network, but the ordeal of Parikh's family suggests that as coronavirus cases explode in India, even private facilities are at risk of being overrun.

India on Sunday (24) reported 6,767 new coronavirus infections, the country's biggest one-day increase.

Government data shows the number of coronavirus cases in the world's second-most populous country are doubling every 13 days or so, even as the government begins easing lockdown restrictions. India has reported more than 145,380 infections, including 4,167 deaths.

"The increasing trend has not gone down," said Bhramar Mukherjee, a professor of biostatistics and epidemiology at the University of Michigan, referring to India's cases. "We've not seen a flattening of the curve."

Mukherjee's team estimates that between 630,000 and 2.1 million people in India - out of a population of 1.3 billion - will become infected by early July.

More than a fifth of the country's coronavirus cases are in Mumbai, India's financial hub and its most populous city, where the Parikhs struggled to find hospital beds for their infected family members.

India's health ministry did not respond to a request for comment on how it will cope with the predicted rise in infections, given that most public hospitals are overcrowded at the best of times.

The federal government has said in media briefings that not all patients need hospitalisation, and it is making rapid efforts to increase the number of

hospital beds and procure health gear. The federal government's data from last year showed there were about 714,000 hospital beds in India, up from about 540,000 in 2009. However, given India's rising population, the number of beds per 1,000 people has grown only slightly in that time.

India has 0.5 beds per 1,000 people, according to the latest data from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), up from 0.4 beds in 2009, but among lowest of countries surveyed by the OECD. In contrast, China has 4.3 hospital beds per 1,000 people, and the United States has 2.8, according to the latest OECD figures.

While millions of India's poor rely on the public health system, especially in rural areas, private facilities account for 55% of hospital admissions, according to government data. The private health sector has been growing over the past two decades, especially in India's big cities, where an expanding class of affluent Indians can afford private care.

Mumbai's municipal authority said it had ordered public officials to take control of at least 100 private hospital beds in all 24 zones in the city of 18 million people to make more beds available for coronavirus patients.

Still, there is a waiting list. An official at a helpline run by Mumbai's civic authorities told Reuters that patients would be notified about availability.

It is not just beds that are in short supply. On May 16, Mumbai's municipal authority said it did not have enough staff to operate beds required for patients critically ill with COVID-19, the disease caused by the new coronavirus.

As a result, resident doctors will receive less time off than prescribed by the federal government, the authority said. Some medical professionals told Reuters they are already overburdened and treating patients without adequate protective gear, exposing them to a higher risk of infection.

Several hospitals in Mumbai, western Gujarat state, the northern city of Agra and Kolkata in the east have in recent weeks shut partially or fully for days because some medical staff were infected with the virus. The federal government has not reported any deaths of medical staff from the virus.

"In our country, healthcare has never gotten priority," said Dr Adarsh Pratap Singh, head of the 2,500-strong resident doctors association at New Delhi's top public hospital, the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS). "The government is now realising the reality, but it's already too late."

The AIIMS group has in recent weeks protested about the lack of health gear and publicly rejected Prime Minister Narendra Modi's call for doctors to donate part of their salaries to his coro-

navirus fund. Some health experts say India's struggle to treat coronavirus patients is the result of chronic underinvestment in healthcare. The Indian government estimates it spends only about 1.5 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) on public health. That figure is higher than it was - about 1 percent in the 1980s and 1.3 percent five years ago - but India still ranks among the world's lowest spenders in terms of percentage of GDP.

This year, Modi's federal government raised its health budget by 6%, but that is still short of the government's own goal of increasing public health spending to 2.5% of GDP by 2025, according to New Delhi-based think-tank Observer Research Foundation.

Keshav Desiraju, a former Indian health secretary, said more investment in the health system before the virus outbreak might have made the health system more resilient. "At the times of a crisis, all the holes show up," he said.

Dr Chaitanya Patil, a senior resident doctor at King Edward Memorial government hospital, one of Mumbai's largest, said the facility had a shortage of medical staff, and the 12 coronavirus wards catering to about 500 patients were almost full.

"There are just too many patients coming in," said Patil. "It is lack of preparedness or a lack of insight of the people planning."

Last week Rajesh Tope, health minister of the state of Maharashtra, which contains Mumbai, said the lack of hospital beds for critically ill patients would not last long.

"In the next two months, more than 17,000 vacant posts of doctors, nurses, technicians and other health workers will be filled," he said in a public address.

India's United Nurses Association, which represents 380,000 medics, took a list of 12 issues they said they are facing - including lack of protective gear and accommodation - to the Supreme Court in April. The court told them they could lodge complaints on a government helpline.

Some nurses are leaving the big cities. Earlier this month, some 300 nurses working at hospitals in the eastern city of Kolkata left for their hometowns 1,500 km (930 miles) away in India's remote northeastern state of Manipur.

A group representing them said they had left because of irregular salaries and inadequate safety gear, among other issues.

"We love our profession," said 24-year-old Shyamkumar, who quit his nursing job in one of Kolkata's hospitals and is planning to head back to Manipur. "But when we are going to work, please give us proper equipment."

—Agencies/AI Jazeera

By Jonathan Gornall

The forgotten victims of COVID-19

Compassion for those less fortunate than ourselves is easy to summon when all is well in our world. Right now, of course, all is far from well for millions of people around the globe, with some of the wealthiest nations having the worst of the coronavirus pandemic and suffering more than their share of the 4.5 million global cases of COVID-19 and the 300,000 deaths recorded so far.

For once the citizens of the developed world have a First World problem worthy of the name.

That is why the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) is keenly aware that raising money and support for Save Generation COVID, the biggest appeal in the organization's 73-year history, will not be easy.

The appeal follows a shocking prediction that over the next six months up to 6,000 children around the world could die every day - not from the coronavirus but from preventable causes, as a direct consequence of the pandemic's impact on health systems in some of the world's poorest countries.

The United Nations, in collaboration with national governments and charitable institutions such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Dubai's Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Global Initiatives, has spent much of the past few decades working successfully through a range of interventions to drive down child mortality in deprived parts of the world.

Since 1990, when one in 11 children died before their fifth birthday, the under-five mortality rate has fallen by more than half. That is certainly a great achievement, but there's still much more to do. In 2018, one child in 26 died before reaching the age of five.

The looming calamity now facing the world, says UNICEF, is that the impact of the coronavirus on vulnerable health systems is threatening to undo decades of progress in reducing preventable child deaths.

Every year, five million children under five still die of avoidable causes. To that grim total we can now add another 2.5 million child deaths over the next 12 months and an extra 56,700 deaths of women in childbirth. This sobering prediction is based on research published last week in the journal *Lancet Global Health* by researchers at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore, Maryland.

The researchers were attempting to assess how much the pandemic has taken attention away from a range of standard but vital interventions, ranging from malaria prevention and care during pregnancy and childbirth to vaccinations and the availability of antibiotics to treat conditions such as neonatal sepsis and dysentery.

The researchers modelled three scenarios for each of 118 low-to-middle-income countries, including Afghanistan, Egypt, India, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Pakistan, Palestine, Syria and Yemen. Essential maternal and child-health interventions in those 118 countries had been reduced by between 9.8% and 51.9%, they found. Acute malnutrition increased by between 10% and 50%.

The "least severe" scenario, they concluded, would result in 253,500 additional child deaths and 12,200 additional maternal deaths over six months. In the worst-case scenario, more than 1.2 million additional children would die and 56,700 mothers.

Although based on "tentative assumptions," these estimates nonetheless show that "if routine health care is disrupted and access to food is decreased, as a result of unavoidable shocks, health-system collapse, or intentional choices made in responding to the pandemic, the increase in child and maternal deaths will be devastating."

It isn't only in the developing world where the most vulnerable are being neglected, because of the strain on health and social care systems because of COVID-19. According to data published last week by the UK's Office for National Statistics, the virus accounted for only one-third of 30,000 extra deaths recorded in care homes, private homes and hospices in England and Wales over the five-week period up to May 1.

In other words, in the UK alone, where more than 33,000 lives have been lost so far to COVID-19, another 20,000 people might have lived longer if the pandemic had not affected the level of care given to them.

Regardless of the worldwide battle against the coronavirus, UNICEF is calling for governments and individuals to step forward with donations to support a six-point Agenda for Action that will help hard-pressed nations to build "sustainable and strong health systems now to ensure the world's poorest countries can fight the pandemic while protecting the delivery of essential health services."

It is vital, says UNICEF, that vulnerable children are kept healthy and well fed, supplied with water, proper sanitation and hygiene and are able to keep learning. Families must be supported "to cover their needs and care for their children" and children must be protected from violence, exploitation and abuse. Refugee and migrant children and those affected by conflict are especially vulnerable.

With schools closed, nearly 370 million children across 143 countries who normally rely on school meals must now look to other sources. As of April 14, more than 117 million children in 37 countries may miss out on their measles vaccination as the pandemic brings immunization campaigns to a halt.

These are just two examples of the upheaval caused by the pandemic. As those in the developed world struggle with the disruption and horror of what their "new normal" looks like, they also face an additional test - of their compassion and humanity.

As UNICEF executive director Henrietta Fore puts it, while all of us are focused on keeping ourselves and our loved ones safe, "we must also remember the millions of children who risk becoming the forgotten victims of this pandemic. What their world looks like tomorrow, and what their futures ultimately look like, is also our responsibility today."

—Jonathan Gornall is a British journalist who has lived and worked in the Middle East and is now based in the UK, and this is a *Syndication Bureau* article

By Helen Davidson

Chinese city plans to turn coronavirus app into permanent health tracker

BEIJING - A Chinese city is planning to make a health-tracking app introduced as part of the coronavirus response a permanent fixture for its population of 10 million.

Versions of the app have been used across mainland China. It displays a QR code with an individual's virus status, which can be used to determine the extent to which the individual is allowed to move about.

Authorities in the city of Hangzhou, a tech hub where the app was first launched, have announced they will seek to launch a broader version to monitor people's health. An individual's status would be colour-coded and scored out of

100 based on medical records, physical test results, levels of activity and other lifestyle choices such as smoking.

According to Chinese media reports, Hangzhou authorities plan to have the app ready by the end of next month. The city's health commission said the proposed system would be a "firewall to enhance people's health and immunity" after the pandemic.

Although apps used during the outbreak have raised concerns about privacy and a lack of transparency in how they operate, Chinese people generally appear to have accepted them as necessary.

However, the push to make a permanent version appears to have crossed a

line for some. "Outside of the epidemic periods, it has strong privacy issues," said one commenter on a news article posted to Weibo.

Another said: "The boundary between personal health and public health should be reflected. The health code is for others to read. Others have no right to read your personal health reports."

The existing apps have run on the ubiquitous platforms Alipay and WeChat, developed for the Chinese government. One commenter said they would delete Alipay from their phone if the app became permanent.

Others expressed fear it would be used by insurance companies for tiered pricing,

or by employers to screen job applicants. Last week's annual meeting of the Chinese Communist party heard calls from delegates to strengthen oversight of security breaches. There were also calls for the National People's Congress to speed up the introduction of data protection laws in response to the massive amounts of information collected on Chinese citizens during the pandemic.

"Given the data explosion, the demand for data security has become increasingly urgent," said Wei Ming, a deputy to the congress and chairman and general manager of China Mobile's Guangdong branch.

—The Guardian