

Nearly one billion confined to homes as virus toll tops 12,000

March 21 2020, by Peter Hutchison, With Afp Bureaus

Almost one billion people were confined to their homes worldwide Saturday as the global coronavirus death toll topped 12,000 and US states rolled out stay-at-home measures already imposed across swathes of Europe.

More than a third of Americans were adjusting to life in various phases of virtual lockdown—including in the US's three biggest cities of New York, Los Angeles and Chicago—with more states expected to ramp up restrictions.

New Jersey became the latest US state to restrict movement as the fast-spreading pandemic upends lives across the planet, closing businesses, shutting schools and forcing millions to work from home.

"This is a time of shared national sacrifice, but also a time to treasure our loved ones," US President Donald Trump told a press conference. "We're going to have a great victory."

The virus death toll surpassed 12,000 worldwide as worst-hit Italy reported a one-day record numbers of deaths at 793—the overall total shot past 4,800—and Spain reported a 32 percent spike in new deaths.

The nearly one billion people are now confined to their homes in 35 countries around the world—including 600 million hemmed in by obligatory government lockdown orders—according to an AFP tally.

In France, police officials said helicopters and drones were being deployed to boost the government's attempts to keep people in their homes.

"The helicopters will give us a larger vision and a panoramic view of the situation in real time to help guide the patrols on the ground," a national police source said.

The measures came as pressure mounted on Olympic organizers to postpone the 2020 Tokyo Games—and as the US Congress thrashes out an emergency economic package that could top \$1 trillion.

'Months, not weeks'

With virus fears gripping the world's number one economy, New Jersey followed several other states, including California, New York and Illinois, in telling residents to stay indoors.

Governor Phil Murphy ordered all non-essential businesses to close their physical stores from 9:00 PM (0100 GMT Sunday).

In New York, Governor Andrew Cuomo warned Saturday that the disruption is likely to last for months.

"I don't believe it's going to be a matter of weeks," he said.

China on Saturday reported no new local infections for a third straight day, and the WHO said the central city of Wuhan, where the virus first emerged late last year, offered a glimmer of "hope for the rest of the world."

But there are growing concerns of a new wave of "imported" infections in the region, with Hong Kong reporting 48 suspected cases on Friday —

its biggest daily jump since the crisis began.

Italy, a nation of 60 million now accounts for 36 percent of the world's coronavirus deaths and its death rate of 8.6 percent among confirmed infections is significantly higher than in most other countries.

France, Italy, Spain and other European countries have ordered people to stay at home, threatening fines in some cases, while Bavaria became the first region in Germany to order a lockdown.

Britain also announced tougher restrictions, telling pubs, restaurants and theaters to close.

While the elderly and those with pre-existing medical conditions are the hardest hit by the virus, the World Health Organization has warned that young people are also vulnerable.

Australia's famed Bondi beach and Rio de Janeiro's beaches were ordered shut.

A restriction on non-essential travel over the US borders with Canada and Mexico was due to come into force Saturday.

And US lawmakers expressed hope of striking an agreement on a \$1 trillion emergency aid package, amid fears of widespread economic fallout because of the pandemic.

Meanwhile, US Vice President Mike Pence said he and his wife would be tested for the coronavirus after one of his office staff contracted the illness.

And America's Food and Drug Administration also approved the first coronavirus test that can be conducted entirely at the point of care for a

patient—and deliver results in 45 minutes.

In sport, the USA Track and Field became the latest influential sports body to ask for the Summer Olympics to be called off.

"The right and responsible thing to do is to prioritize everyone's health and safety," chief Max Siegel said in a letter to the US Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC).

China help

The strict confinement measures follow the template set by China, as a lockdown imposed in Hubei province, of which Wuhan is the capital, appeared to have paid off.

Europe now accounts for more than half of the world's fatalities linked to COVID-19.

Accurate figures are difficult to come by, however, as many of those who die suffer from other illnesses, and infection rates are uncertain because of a lack of testing in many countries.

The shadow of the virus is lengthening across Africa and the Middle East as well.

Cases stand at more than 1,000 across Africa, where health care systems are fragile and social distancing is not possible in many crowded cities.

The Democratic Republic of Congo, Finland, Lithuania and Mauritius all reported their first virus deaths Saturday.

In Iran, which reported 123 new deaths Saturday, both supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Hassan Rouhani promised the

country would overcome the outbreak—but still refused to join the rest of the world in imposing heavy restrictions.

The country has more than 1,500 deaths and some 20,000 infections.

In Latin America, Bolivia ordered citizens to stay at home from Sunday, and Colombia said it would begin mandatory isolation from Tuesday.

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