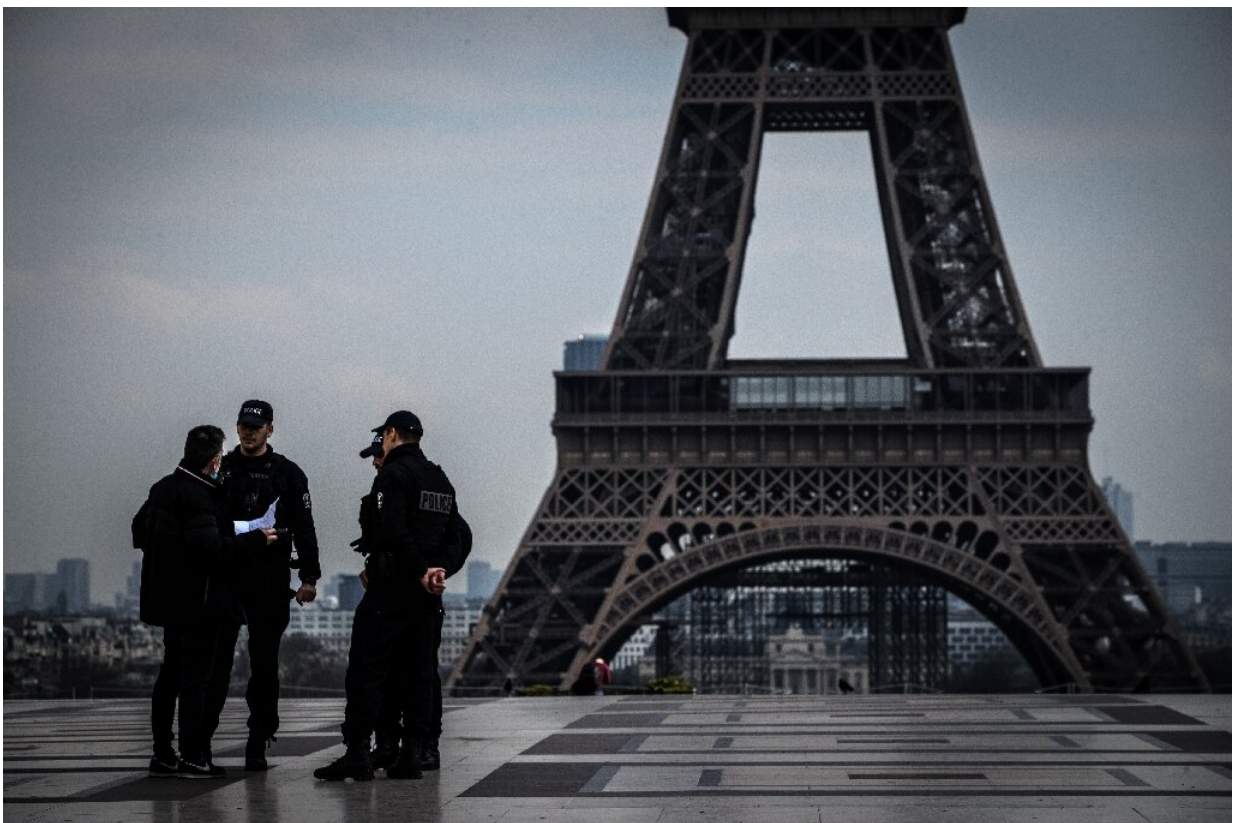


Europe locks down as WHO calls for 'boldest actions' against pandemic

March 17 2020, by Mariette Le Roux and Joseph Schmid, With Afp Bureaus



Tens of thousands of police have been mobilised in France

European countries moved into near total lockdown on Tuesday in a bid to halt the rapid spread of the deadly coronavirus.

The World Health Organization called for the "boldest actions" against the pandemic on the continent, the outbreak's new epicentre.

From France to Germany to Spain, millions were confined to their homes as shops and restaurants closed and borders were sealed, while European leaders edged towards banning non-essential travel to the continent.

The draconian measures, never before seen in peacetime, have upended society and roiled financial markets, prompting governments to roll out emergency economic measures as fears mount of a global recession.

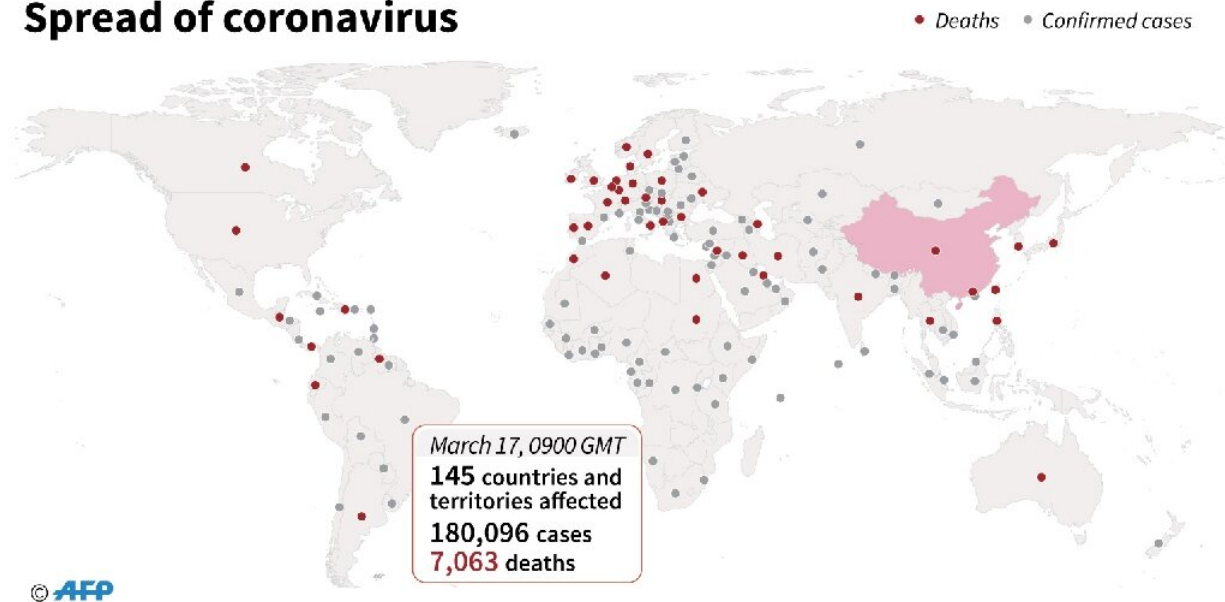
The sports world has been hammered too, with the Euro 2020 the latest tournament to be postponed and major doubts lingering over the fate of the Tokyo Summer Olympics.

The outbreak, which first emerged in China late last year, has quickly marched across the globe, infecting more than 180,000 people and killing over 7,000.

Asian hotspots China and South Korea have seen new infections and deaths level out in recent weeks—China reported just one new domestic case on Tuesday—but numbers are ballooning across Europe, with Italy, Spain and France especially hard hit.

Africa, with its fragile healthcare systems, has also recorded more than 400 cases, and Latin America has more than 1,100, with the continent's most populated country Brazil confirming its first death Tuesday.

Spread of coronavirus



Global spread of coronavirus

'At war'

Across France, all citizens were ordered to remain indoors after President Emmanuel Macron declared a war on the outbreak.

People are only permitted to leave their houses on a limited basis—to buy food or for health reasons, for example—and must carry a document declaring their outing.

About 100,000 police and gendarmes will be out on the streets to enforce the measures, which are in place for at least two weeks, after Macron warned violations would be punished.

"We are at war, a public health war certainly. We are fighting not against an army or another nation. But the enemy is there, invisible and elusive

and on the move," he said in a sombre television address Monday night.

Britain stepped up its own measures following scientific advice that infections and deaths would spiral without drastic action.

Citizens were told to avoid all non-essential overseas travel and large social gatherings, with more stringent restrictions expected in the coming days.



Italy is the hardest hit country outside China

In nearby Ireland, normally raucous St Patrick's Day celebrations were

muted after parades were cancelled across the country.

"This place would be just swarming with people, the whole town would be," Anthony Whyte told AFP from the cobbled streets of Dublin's Temple Bar.

"It's like a ghost town. It's like armageddon," the 49-year-old told AFP.

Italy and Spain have already locked in millions of citizens and shut most shops, while Germany banned gatherings in churches, mosques and synagogues and said playgrounds and non-essential shops would close, too.

EU leaders held a videoconference Tuesday to discuss a proposed ban on non-essential travel to the bloc—an idea backed by France and some allies to forestall member states closing their doors to each other.

The talks were held as the World Health Organization issued an urgent plea to fight the pandemic in Europe.

"Every country, with no exceptions, needs to take their boldest actions to stop or slow down the virus threat," said WHO regional director for Europe, Hans Kluge.



Workers disinfect the area surrounding the lion enclosure at Skopje Zoo

'Apocalyptic vibe'

Following a hammering in recent days, US and European markets bounced back Tuesday, after Wall Street clocked its sharpest daily drop in more than three decades on Monday.

Sentiment was buoyed by reports that US President Donald Trump will ask Congress to approve a massive \$850-billion emergency spending package to contain the growing economic damage from pandemic, in line with similar moves taken by European governments.

Trump acknowledged the United States "may be" heading into a recession due to the virus, as G7 leaders vowed to coordinate their response to the virus and "do whatever it takes, using all policy tools"—after a meeting held via videoconference.

Trump said he was asking Americans to restrict gatherings to groups of fewer than 10 people, while its northern neighbour Canada closed its borders to most foreigners, excluding Americans.

Every sector from tourism to food to aviation is affected, as the global economy effectively goes into shutdown.

German giant Volkswagen on Tuesday joined other European carmakers in closing down plants, swiftly followed by Mercedes-Benz parent company Daimler which said most European operations would be suspended.



St Patrick's Day festivities were cancelled in Dublin

Major world airlines have axed almost all flights temporarily, triggering pleas to help carriers survive.

Italy announced plans to renationalise national carrier Alitalia, and France said it was ready to nationalise large companies if necessary.

Euro 2020 postponed

It is not just the economy that has been badly hit.

The European Championship was on Tuesday postponed until next year, and doubts are looming about whether the Tokyo Olympics—due to start in July, can move ahead—even as Japanese officials insists the event will be held as planned.

The French Open was also postponed Tuesday, now scheduled to start in September instead of May.



A sign announces a two-item limit for certain items as people shop for food in Monterey Park, California

Drugmakers are scrambling for a salve.

US health officials said the first human trial to evaluate a possible vaccine had begun, although it may take up to 18 months before it becomes available.

French pharmaceutical giant Sanofi and American drugmaker Regeneron also said they had started clinical trials for Kevzara, a drug currently used to treat rheumatoid arthritis and which they hope will reduce lung inflammation seen in severe cases of coronavirus illness.

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