

Europe ramps up virus response as infections rise

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European nations on Wednesday shut schools and universities and slapped more restrictions on travel, sporting and cultural events over the surging coronavirus outbreak, as more countries announced deaths from the epidemic.

The number of cases across the globe has risen to more than 118,000 with close to 4,300 deaths, including a jump in fatalities in Iran and Italy

in particular, according to an AFP tally.

Millions of people in Italy, which remains at the centre of Europe's outbreak, are grappling with a nationwide clampdown that has emptied streets, shuttered shops and disrupted train and air travel.

The government vowed to spend up to 25 billion euros (\$28 billion) to help contain the fallout from the epidemic, including cash injections for hard-hit hotels and restaurants and allowing families to suspend some mortgage payments.

And signs of a widening European crisis began to appear, with Albania, Belgium, Sweden and Bulgaria registering their first deaths and Spain confirming a jump in cases by a quarter to more than 2,000.

Even places with no significant outbreaks like Poland and Ukraine announced school closures and other restrictive measures, and Austria said it would shut museums and halt train services to and from Italy.

In the Middle East, Iran reported 63 new deaths, its highest single-day toll. It has yet to impose quarantines but has closed schools, universities and hotels and called on people not to travel.

Offering a sliver of hope to the rest of the world, China again announced negligible new daily infections and only a relatively small number of deaths.

Some businesses in China's Hubei province—where the virus was first detected in December—were told they could restart work, reducing fears of a prolonged disruption of supply chains.

However, China remains the worst-affected country with more than 80,000 confirmed cases and over 3,000 deaths.

More than 60,000 Chinese people have been cured, though, meaning countries with newer outbreaks were rapidly approaching illness levels on a par with China—for example, Iran confirmed another spike in cases taking its total past 9,000.

Although Panama confirmed its first death on Tuesday, Latin America—along with Africa and Oceania—has so far reported only small numbers of cases.

'It makes people nervous'

Italy's lockdown, unprecedented in western Europe, stops people from moving around or leaving the country unless they have a valid medical, family or work reason.

"There are no clients; lots of colleagues are already staying at home with nothing to do," 59-year-old Milan taxi driver Daniele said.

Despite the improving situation in China, officials imposed new measures, decreeing that all international arrivals in Beijing must undergo two weeks of quarantine.

And the United States saw its first signs of an emergency footing with the New York city government forming a containment zone around a suburb at the centre of an outbreak.

Officials insisted the measures were designed to facilitate self-quarantine rather than isolate the area, but some locals were unconvinced.

"It makes people nervous to be around others, it makes people nervous to get inside into businesses and such," Miles Goldberg, who runs a bar in the suburb of New Rochelle, told AFP.

Trump plan flounders

Disruption to supply chains from China, flagging demand and wildly fluctuating stock markets have sparked a series of profit warnings from companies and pushed governments into action.

The UK promised a \$39 billion fiscal stimulus and the [central bank](#) slashed its main interest rate to 0.25 percent following a similar move by the US Federal Reserve last week, intended to make borrowing cheaper and boost economic activity.

US President Donald Trump has promised "major" stimulus measures, most likely including tax cuts, but after bruising negotiations with sceptical lawmakers he has so far failed to provide further detail.

Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said the plan was the president's "number one priority," adding that Trump would meet bank bosses Wednesday.

However, Wall Street stocks tumbled after a survey showed that nearly three-quarters of American firms have suffered supply disruptions.

Questions remain over the US handling of the virus on the ground—the number of infections almost doubled Tuesday to top 1,000 after faulty test kits had helped the illness to spread without being detected.

The latest lightning rod for criticism was the evacuation of virus-hit cruise ship the Grand Princess, with sharp differences emerging between national and state officials and passengers complaining of a lack of information.

Motor-racing scare

COVID-19 continued to rip up the schedules of musicians, sports stars and cultural figures as governments around the world banned large gatherings.

England's top-flight football league saw its first cancellation with Wednesday's match between Arsenal and Manchester City postponed after players from the London club were put into quarantine.

Motor racing reported a scare, with two members of the Haas Formula One team isolating themselves before the Australian Grand Prix after showing symptoms.

Japan—where this year's Olympic Games are due to be held—was forced to scale back commemorations of the ninth anniversary of the killer tsunami that triggered the Fukushima nuclear meltdown, cancelling the annual public ceremony.

"It's time to take every possible measure to prevent the spread of infections in our country," said Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

Elsewhere in Asia, the Philippines called off crucifixion reenactments, a tourist spectacle usually held on Good Friday.

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