

Italian death toll overtakes China's as virus spreads

March 19 2020, by Nicole Winfield and Tim Sullivan



Medical personnel at work in the intensive care unit of the hospital of Brescia, Italy, Thursday, March 19, 2020. Italy has become the country with the most coronavirus-related deaths, surpassing China by registering 3,405 dead. Italy reached the gruesome milestone on the same day the epicenter of the pandemic, Wuhan, China, recorded no new infections. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some it can cause more severe illness. (Claudio Furlan/LaPresse via AP)

The death toll in Italy from the coronavirus overtook China's on Thursday, and infections in the United States climbed past 10,000, in a stark illustration of how the crisis has pivoted toward the West.

Italy, with a population of 60 million, recorded at least 3,405 deaths, or roughly 150 more than in China—a country with a population over 20 times larger.

Italy reached the bleak milestone the same day that Wuhan, the Chinese city where the coronavirus first emerged three months ago, recorded no new infections, a sign that the communist country's draconian lockdowns were effective in containing the scourge.

On Thursday, a visiting Chinese Red Cross team criticized Italians' failure to properly quarantine themselves and take the national lockdown seriously.

At the U.N. in New York, meanwhile, Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said the world "is at war with a virus" and warned that "a global recession—perhaps of record dimensions—is a near certainty."

"If we let the virus spread like wildfire – especially in the most vulnerable regions of the world—it would kill millions of people," he said.

The virus appeared to be opening an alarming new front in Africa and also reached at least one European head of state: 62-year-old Prince Albert II of the tiny principality of Monaco. The palace announced that he tested positive but was continuing to work from his office and was being treated by doctors from Princess Grace Hospital, named after his American actress mother.



A worker disinfects the street to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in Barcelona, Spain, Thursday, March 19, 2020. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some, it can cause more severe illness, especially in older adults and people with existing health problems. (AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti)

In the U.S., the damage to the world's largest economy kept piling up, with unemployment claims surging, as Congress rushed to pass a \$1 trillion emergency package to shore up industry and help households pull through the crisis. The first of two possible rounds of relief checks will consist of payments of \$1,000 per adult and \$500 for each child.

The U.S. death toll rose to 160, primarily elderly people. Johns Hopkins University, which has been tallying the virus' spread around the world,

said the U.S. had more than 10,700 cases.

Worldwide the death toll crept toward 10,000 as the total number of infections topped 220,000, including nearly 85,000 people who have recovered.

French Prime Minister Edouard Philippe pleaded with people to keep their distance from one another to avoid spreading the virus, even as the crisis pushed them to seek comfort.



A person is taken on a stretcher into the United Memorial Medical Center after going through testing for COVID-19 Thursday, March 19, 2020, in Houston. People were lined up in their cars in a line that stretched over two miles to be

tested in the drive-thru testing for coronavirus. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip)

"When you love someone, you should avoid taking them in your arms," he said in Parliament. "It's counterintuitive, and it's painful. The psychological consequences, the way we are living, are very disturbing—but it's what we must do."

Health authorities have cited a variety of reasons for Italy's high toll, key among them its large population of elderly people, who are particularly susceptible to serious complications from the virus, though severe cases have also been seen in younger patients. Italy has the world's second-oldest population, and the vast majority of its dead—87%—were over 70.

Jonas Schmidt-Chanasit, a virologist at Germany's Bernhard Nocht Institute for Tropical Medicine, said Italy's high death rate could be explained in part by the almost total breakdown of the health system in some areas.



A German police officer drive on a motorcycles between trucks, which jam on the motorway A4 near Goerlitz, Germany, Thursday, March 19, 2020. Thousands of truck drivers have to hold out in a traffic jam, which has grown to a length of about 40 kilometers, before the border with Poland. (Robert Michael/dpa via AP)

On a visit to hard-hit Milan, Sun Shuopeng, the head of a Chinese Red Cross delegation helping advise Italy, said he was shocked to see so many people walking around, using public transportation and eating out and partying in hotels.

"Right now we need to stop all economic activity and we need to stop the mobility of people," he said. "All people should be staying at home in quarantine."

Alberto Villani, the head of Italian civil protection, defended Italy's healthcare system as he announced the new death toll, and insisted the country's lockdown is a model for other countries.

As long as Italians "rigorously" abide by strict measures to stay at home and maintain social distancing, "Italy will overcome the challenge," he said.

Spain has been the hardest-hit European country after Italy, and in Madrid a four-star hotel began operating as a makeshift hospital for coronavirus patients. The Madrid Hotel Business Association said it has placed 40 hotels with room for 9,000 people at the service of the Madrid region, which has near half of Spain's 17,000 or so cases.



Passengers from the coronavirus hit Braemar cruise ship return to Heathrow

Airport in London, Thursday March 19, 2020. Flights landed in Heathrow from Jose Marti Airport, in Havana, Cuba, returning the British passengers from the COVID-19 hit liner. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. (Steve Parsons/PA via AP)

The British government, which was slow to react to the virus, shifted gears and drew up legislation giving itself new powers to detain people and restrict gatherings. The bill is expected to be approved by Parliament next week. In London, home to almost 9 million, authorities urged people to stay off public transportation and considered imposing tougher travel restrictions.

The British supermarket chain Sainsbury's reserved the first hour of shopping for vulnerable customers, one of many such efforts around the world.

Jim Gibson, 72, of London, said he found most of his groceries there in a "relatively trauma-free" experience. But he fretted that he hadn't been able to get the medicine he needed for his wife and himself, and expressed concerns that Britain's government had been too slow in ramping up testing.



A worker sprays disinfectant as a precaution against the new coronavirus at Quartier Cineart movie theater in Bangkok, Thailand, Thursday, March 19, 2020. Thailand's government has enacted stronger measures to combat the spread of the coronavirus, including postponing the country's biggest holiday, shutting down schools, movie theaters and closing bars. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some it can cause more severe illness. (AP Photo/Sakchai Lalit)

"You can't go on ignoring World Health Organization guidelines—if they're wrong, who the hell is right?" he said. "Let's have no shilly-shallying."

In China, Thursday marked the first time since Jan. 20 that Wuhan reported no new locally transmitted cases, a rare glimmer of hope and

perhaps a lesson in the strict measures needed to contain the virus.

Wuhan, which has been under a strict lockdown since January, once was the place where thousands lay sick or dying in hurriedly constructed hospitals. But Chinese authorities said all 34 new cases recorded over the previous day had come from abroad.

"Today, we have seen the dawn after so many days of hard effort," said Jiao Yahui, a senior inspector at the National Health Commission.

Meanwhile, the World Health Organization warned that the virus is spreading quickly in Africa—an especially alarming development, given the poor state of health care in many of its countries.



Shoppers wait in line to enter a Stop & Shop supermarket during hours open

daily only for seniors Thursday, March 19, 2020, in North Providence, R.I. This week grocery store chains and other retailers began offering special shopping hours for seniors and other groups considered the most vulnerable to the new coronavirus. The dedicated shopping times are designed to allow seniors, pregnant women and people with underlying health conditions to shop among smaller crowds and reduce their chances of acquiring the virus. (AP Photo/David Goldman)

"About 10 days ago we had about five countries" with the virus, said WHO's Africa chief, Dr. Matshidiso Moeti. Now 35 of Africa's 54 countries have cases, with the total close to 650. It is an "extremely rapid evolution," she said. The first sub-Saharan Africa case was announced Feb. 28.

European stock markets were up only slightly after losses in Asia despite a massive 750 billion-euro stimulus package announced overnight by the European Central Bank.

Wall Street was calm in early trading by the standards of the past few days, when traders—weighing the increasing likelihood of a recession against the huge economic support pledged by global authorities—have caused wild swings.

With wide swaths of the U.S. economy grinding to a halt, the number of Americans filing for unemployment benefits surged by 70,000 last week, more than economists expected.



The trans-Atlantic cruise ship Costa Luminosa arrives in the port of Marseille, southern France, Thursday, March 19, 2020. The ship was allowed to stop in Tenerife in Spain on Sunday and offload three people who needed to be evacuated. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some it can cause more severe illness. (AP Photo/Daniel Cole)



People stand in designated areas on the floor of an elevator as a social distancing effort to prevent the spread of the new coronavirus at a shopping mall in Surabaya, Indonesia, Thursday, March 19, 2020. The vast majority of people recover from the new coronavirus. According to the World Health Organization, most people recover in about two to six weeks, depending on the severity of the illness. (AP Photo/Trisnadi)



People walk by an electronic stock board of a securities firm in Tokyo, Thursday, March 19, 2020. Shares in Asia failed to hold onto opening gains on Thursday, skidding further after the latest selloff on Wall Street. (AP Photo/Koji Sasahara)



An employee of the National Theater displays a face mask in a costume workshop in Prague, Czech Republic, Thursday, March 19, 2020. On Thursday Czech Republic has made it mandatory that all people must cover their mouths and noses in public to stem the spread of the novel coronavirus called COVID-19. Improvised methods such as a scarf or homemade mask are allowed. (AP Photo/Petr David Josek)



Biological Science Specialist Reginald Clyburn puts on biosafety 4 protective clothing for handling viral diseases at U.S. Army Medical Research and Development Command at Fort Detrick in Frederick, Md., Thursday, March 19, 2020, where scientists are working to help develop solutions to prevent, detect and treat the coronavirus. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)



A child wears a protective mask and gloves in the subway system due to COVID-19 concerns, Thursday, March 19, 2020, in New York. New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo tightened work-from-home rules Thursday as confirmed cases continued to climb in New York, an expected jump as testing becomes more widespread. But he stressed that roadblocks and martial law for New York City were merely rumors. (AP Photo/John Minchillo)



Kashmiri health workers prepares to enter a residential building during contact-tracing drive after the first person in the region was tested positive for COVID-19 in Srinagar, Indian controlled Kashmir, Thursday, March 19, 2020. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some it can cause more severe illness. (AP Photo/ Dar Yasin)



Passengers walk in an empty terminal at the airport of Barcelona, Spain, Thursday, March 19, 2020. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some, it can cause more severe illness, especially in older adults and people with existing health problems. (AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti)



A food vendor wears a face mask and goggles as a preventative measure against the spread of the new coronavirus at a market in Caracas, Venezuela, Thursday, March 19, 2020. (AP Photo/Ariana Cubillos)

The U.S. Federal Reserve unveiled measures to support money-market funds and borrowing as investors worldwide rush to build up dollars and cash.

Ford, General Motors and Fiat Chrysler, along with Honda and Toyota, announced on Wednesday that they would close all of their factories in the U.S., Canada and Mexico. The shutdown of Detroit's Big Three alone will idle about 150,000 workers.

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Citation: Italian death toll overtakes China's as virus spreads (2020, March 19) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-03-italian-death-toll-china-virus.html>

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