

# Italy locks down as China signals major progress in virus fight

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Italy imposed unprecedented nationwide restrictions on its 60 million people on Tuesday to control the deadly coronavirus, as China signalled major progress in its battle against the global epidemic.

The outbreak, combined with a crash in oil prices, caused carnage on financial markets on Monday, sparking the biggest losses in more than a decade—although Asian markets recovered slightly on Tuesday and European stocks opened strongly.

The World Health Organization warned there was a "very real" threat of a pandemic but its chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said the planet was "not at the mercy" of the illness, which has so far killed more than 4,000 people.

China was keen to underscore its progress in tackling the virus—President Xi Jinping paid his first visit to the epicentre of the crisis, the city of Wuhan in Hubei province.

Officials later announced that containment measures in Hubei, whose 56 million people have been under lockdown since January, would be eased.

The provincial government said residents would be given coloured health codes on a mobile app—those with a green code in medium and low-risk areas would be allowed to travel in the province.

However, there is no indication people can leave Hubei, and the measures did not appear to loosen restrictions in Wuhan.

Figures from China showed further signs that the worst is over with officials reporting 17 deaths and 19 new infections on Tuesday, the lowest daily number of new cases since reporting began in late January.

China's apparent progress stands in stark contrast to the rapid rise around the world, particularly in Italy, where more than 9,000 cases and 463 deaths have been reported—the most severe outbreak elsewhere in the world.

In a desperate bid to stem the spread, Italy's Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte announced the entire country would be placed on lockdown from Tuesday.

"I am going to sign a decree that can be summarised as follows: I stay at home," Conte said.

"Travel must be avoided across the entire peninsula unless it is justified by professional reasons, by cases of need or for health reasons."

## **Trump vows 'substantial' measures**

The measures extended a restricted zone that Italy had imposed on Sunday across the north, including the major cities of Milan and Venice, where streets were semi-deserted.

The national restrictions will run until April 3 and mean that schools and universities will all immediately close.

Top-level football matches and all other sporting events are also being suspended for the coming month.

But it was not immediately clear how the measures would be enforced—trains and flights continued to operate into and out of Milan and Venice on Monday despite the earlier decree.

Despite the lockdown, Pope Francis told priest to visit the sick.

In neighbouring France, the government has banned gatherings of more than 1,000 people, leading to the cancellation of music concerts and other cultural and sporting events.

Worldwide more than 114,000 cases have been recorded in 105

countries and territories. Africa, Latin America and Oceania are the only regions yet to report major outbreaks.

Panic buying of products such as sanitising handwash has spread across the world and officials in countries with no outbreak have begun imposing draconian measures—India for example has banned foreign cruise ships from docking.

Senior officials have not been spared by the disease. Several Iranian top-brass succumbed in the early phase of the spread and the head of the Port Authority in the US city of New York tested positive on Monday.

Reports have swirled suggesting US President Donald Trump could be vulnerable after several senior Republicans quarantined themselves because they had been in contact with a virus sufferer.

The White House insisted Trump had not been in contact with anyone confirmed to have COVID-19, but Vice-President Mike Pence did little to dampen concern when he conceded he did not know whether the president had been tested.

There are concerns that the United States could become another hotspot, with at least 26 deaths and 605 confirmed infections so far.

Trump has played down the risks of the virus for weeks but after Monday's market rout he promised "very substantial" economic measures would be put to Congress on Tuesday.

## **Markets bounce back**

Uncertainty over the spread of COVID-19, coupled with a collapse in oil prices, created panic on the markets during what some dubbed "Black Monday," with the Dow Jones index losing more than 2,000 points.

The run on stocks robbed Trump of one of his main talking points ahead of the November presidential election—he has often flagged booming markets as proof that his economic policies are working.

Market jitters eased on Tuesday as oil prices jumped as much as eight percent after plunging by a third the previous day, in the worst session since the 1991 Gulf War.

The bounce helped fuel a rally in equities in Asia and Europe but observers remained concerned over the virus spread.

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