

Hunt for medical gear to fight virus becomes all-consuming

March 23 2020, by Lori Hinnant and Foster Klug



Staff inspect medical equipments at an emergency hospital set up amid the new coronavirus outbreak in Jakarta, Indonesia, Monday, March 23, 2020. Indonesia has changed towers built to house athletes in the 2018 Asian Games to emergency hospitals with a 3,000-bed capacity in the country's hard-hit capital, where new patients have surged in the past week. (Hafidz Mubarak A/Pool Photo via AP)

The hunt for ventilators and other medical supplies consumed the U.S. and Europe on Monday, as new coronavirus infections soared and political paralysis stalled efforts for a quick aid package from Congress. Markets in Asia and Europe sank along with U.S. futures as more governments tightened restrictions to fight the pandemic.

Fears grew that densely crowded New York could become one of the world's biggest coronavirus hot spots, prompting cancelations of everything from play dates to picnics in the park to pickup basketball games. The city's mayor said hospitals were 10 days away from shortages in "really basic supplies" that seriously endangered both health care workers and patients.

"If we don't get the equipment, we're literally going to lose lives," Mayor Bill de Blasio told CNN.

A surge in infections has caused a critical shortage of medical supplies in many places. Italy has already seen 18 doctors with coronavirus die. A senior Spanish health official called the infection of 3,910 health care workers, roughly 12% of the country's total cases, "very bad news."

To combat this, Spain erected a field hospital in a convention center. British health workers pleaded for more gear, saying they felt like "cannon fodder." U.S. President Donald Trump ordered mobile hospital centers be sent to Washington, California and New York. In France, doctors scrounged masks from the unlikeliest of places—an architect, construction workers in Breton, factory floors.



A countdown clock for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics is reflected in a puddle of water outside Tokyo Station in Tokyo, Monday, March 23, 2020. The IOC will take up to four weeks to consider postponing the Tokyo Olympics amid mounting criticism of its handling of the coronavirus crisis that now includes Canada saying it won't send a team to the games this year and the leader of track and field, the biggest sport at the games, also calling for a delay. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

"There's a wild race to get surgical masks," François Blanchecott, a biologist on the front lines of testing, told France Inter radio. "We're asking mayors' offices, industries, any enterprises that might have a store of masks."

Health care workers say they are being asked to reuse and ration

disposable masks and gloves. A shortage of ventilators, crucial for treating serious COVID-19 cases, has become critical as has a lack of test kits to comply with the World Health Organization's exhortations to test as many people as possible. In the United States, a fierce political battle over ventilators has emerged, especially after Trump told state governors to go find their own medical equipment and some strongly replied that was not the best solution.

China has been the one nation to counter this trend, sending planeloads of medical equipment like masks, gloves and protective gear as well as doctors to countries across Europe, including hard-hit Italy, France and Spain as well as countries with weaker medical systems like Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia.



Street performer Eddie Webb looks around the nearly deserted French Quarter looking to make money in New Orleans, Sunday, March 22, 2020. With much of the city already hunkered down due to the coronavirus pandemic, Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards issues a shelter-in-place order to take effect starting Monday at 5:00 PM. (AP Photo/Gerald Herbert)

"The U.S. is completely wasting the precious time that China has won for the world," said Geng Shuang, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, promised that medical supplies are about to start pouring in and will be "clearly directed to those hot spots that need it most."

But efforts for a quick aid package from Congress faltered. The U.S. Senate voted against advancing a nearly \$2 trillion economic rescue package. Democrats argued it was tilted toward corporations rather than workers and health care providers. Another vote was expected Monday.

The delay shook investors, as has the accumulation of canceled events large and small, the soaring numbers of unemployed and a widespread pullback in spending. U.S. futures slipped more than 3% on Monday and stocks fell in Paris, Frankfurt and London after a brutal session in Asia.



President Donald Trump speaks during a coronavirus task force briefing at the White House, Sunday, March 22, 2020, in Washington. (AP Photo/Patrick Semansky)

Governments everywhere are grappling with how to keep essential supplies flowing as their economies slow to keep the virus from spreading. French President Emmanuel Macron urged employees in supermarkets and other essential businesses to keep working despite the threats to their health.

"We need to keep the country running," Macron said.

Worldwide, nearly 350,000 people have been infected and 15,000 have died from the virus that first emerged in central China late last year. As

cases in China ebbed, the dangers to Europe and the U.S. have grown exponentially, although Germany on Monday cautiously reported some flattening of its infection curve.

After just a few weeks, the U.S. has more than 33,000 cases and more than 400 deaths.

For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever or coughing. But for some older adults and people with existing health problems it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. Over 100,000 people have recovered, mostly in China.



President Donald Trump speaks during a coronavirus task force briefing at the White House, Sunday, March 22, 2020, in Washington. (AP Photo/Patrick

Semansky)

Authorities kept up their push to get people to stay home but some were clearly not listening.

Photos showed long lines of parked cars as hundreds walked up the remote mountains of Snowdonia National Park in Wales, which saw "its busiest-ever visitor day" on Saturday. The park on Monday urged the British government to be more explicit in its advice so people "protect themselves and others."

British Health Secretary Matt Hancock described those ignoring the government's social distancing recommendations as "very selfish" and warned that stricter rules might be coming soon.

"If people go within two meters of others who they don't live with, then they're helping to spread the virus," he said. "And the consequences of that costs lives."

Italy's infections continued to spike, hitting 59,000 cases and 5,476 deaths, and India's prime minister asked, with mixed results, his nation of 1.3 billion people to stay home. The arrival of the global pandemic in Syria as well as the Gaza Strip has raised concerns it could run rampant in some of the most vulnerable areas in the Mideast.

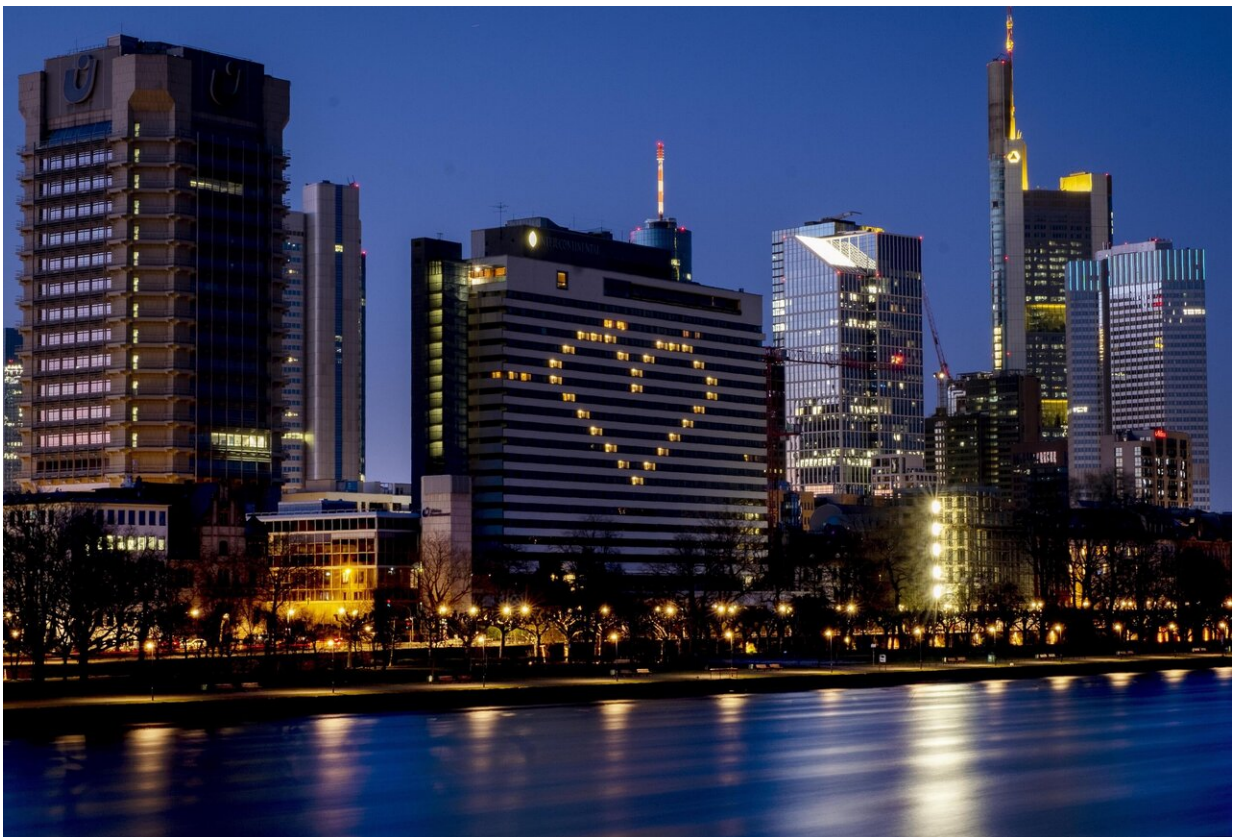


A Nepalese man covers his face with handkerchief at Tribhuvan International airport in Kathmandu, Nepal, Monday, March 23, 2020. Nepalese government has suspended landing permission to all scheduled international airlines carrying Nepal inbound passengers as a precaution against COVID-19. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some it can cause more severe illness. (AP Photo/Niranjan Shrestha)

Two former passengers of the virus-infected Diamond Princess cruise ship died, bringing to 10 the number of deaths from a ship that had over 700 infections and stands as a prime example of how not to contain an outbreak. With weddings and other large gatherings banned in many places, an untold number of burials are going forward with nothing more than a minister, a funeral home staffer and one loved one to bear witness.

Republican Rand Paul of Kentucky became the first U.S. senator to announce he was infected, joining the likes of celebrities like opera superstar Plácido Domingo. German Chancellor Angela Merkel put herself into quarantine after a doctor who gave her a pneumonia vaccine tested positive.

With no end in sight to the global uncertainty, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe acknowledged that postponing this year's Summer Olympics could be unavoidable. Canada and Australia added to the pressure on Olympic organizers by suggesting they wouldn't send athletes to Tokyo this summer. The International Olympic Committee said it would examine the situation over the next few weeks.



A hotel has switched on the lights in some rooms to form a heart near the

buildings of the banking district in Frankfurt, Germany, Sunday, March 22, 2020, as the German government announced new public restrictions to help avoid the spread of Coronavirus. For some people the COVID-19 coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms, but for some it can cause severe illness including pneumonia.(AP Photo/Michael Probst)



Members of a local residents group wear protective gear as they disinfect a local park as a precaution against the new coronavirus in Seoul, South Korea, Monday, March 23, 2020. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some it can cause more severe illness. (AP Photo/Lee Jin-man)



A view of Via Laietana street as authorities control public movements in Barcelona, Spain, Sunday, March 22, 2020. Spanish health authorities say intensive care units in the hardest-hit areas of Spain are close to their limit. The army was building a field hospital with 5,500 beds in a convention center in Madrid, where hotels are also being turned into wards for virus patients without serious breathing problems. For some people the COVID-19 coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms, but for some it causes severe illness. (AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti)



A traffic officer checks a driver for valid documents following a lockdown order by the government to help stop the spread of the coronavirus in Athens, Monday, March 23, 2020. Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis has announced a lockdown, starting at 6 a.m. (0400GMT) Monday. All citizens and residents must stay at home, or risk a 150-euro fine. (AP Photo/Thanassis Stavrakis)



Stranded tourists check flight information at Tribhuvan International airport in Kathmandu, Nepal, Monday, March 23, 2020. Nepalese government has suspended landing permission to all scheduled international airlines carrying Nepal inbound passengers as a precaution against COVID-19. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some it can cause more severe illness. (AP Photo/Niranjan Shrestha)



People cover their faces in a fog of fumigation to kill mosquitos to help prevent the outbreak of dengue fever in Jakarta, Indonesia, Monday, March 23, 2020. Indonesian President Joko Widodo has ruled out the possibility of imposing a lockdown on the capital city and has instead ordered mass testing to contain the coronavirus disease spread and has prepared about 200 hospitals run by government, military and police as well as private as the country braces for an anticipated surge in COVID-19 patients. (AP Photo/Dita Alankara)



A woman walks on the sidewalk of a section of the normally jammed Sudirman Street in the main business district in Jakarta, Indonesia, Monday, March 23, 2020. Indonesian President Joko Widodo has ruled out the possibility of imposing a lockdown on the capital city and has instead ordered mass testing to contain the coronavirus disease spread and has prepared about 200 hospitals run by government, military and police as well as private as the country braces for an anticipated surge in COVID-19 patients.(AP Photo/Dita Alangkara)



Security personnel patrol after a government announced to lockdown the city for concerns over the spread of the coronavirus in Karachi, Pakistan, Monday, March 23, 2020. The vast majority of people recover from the virus. According to the World Health Organization, most people recover in about two to six weeks, depending on the severity of the illness. (AP Photo/Fareed Khan)



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A man wearing a face mask walks over a pedestrian bridge over the normally jammed Sudirman Street in the main business district in Jakarta, Indonesia, Monday, March 23, 2020. Indonesian President Joko Widodo has ruled out the possibility of imposing a lockdown on the capital city and has instead ordered mass testing to contain the coronavirus disease spread and has prepared about 200 hospitals run by government, military and police as well as private as the country braces for an anticipated surge in COVID-19 patients. (AP Photo/Dita Alangkara)



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Indonesian President Joko Widodo, left, inspects medical equipments at an emergency hospital set up amid the new coronavirus outbreak in Jakarta, Indonesia, Monday, March 23, 2020. Indonesia has changed towers built to house athletes in the 2018 Asian Games to emergency hospitals with a 3,000-bed capacity in the country's hard-hit capital, where new patients have surged in the past week. (Hafidz Mubarak A/Pool Photo via AP)



An empty road is seen in the outskirts of Frankfurt, Germany, just before sunrise on Monday, March 23, 2020, the day after the German government spoke out more restrictions to avoid the spread of the. Coronavirus. 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. (AP Photo/Michael Probst)



A staff member assists a colleague to don his protective gears at an emergency hospital set up amid the new coronavirus outbreak in Jakarta, Indonesia, Monday, March 23, 2020. Indonesia has changed towers built to house athletes in the 2018 Asian Games to emergency hospitals with a 3,000-bed capacity in the country's hard-hit capital, where new patients have surged in the past week. (Hafidz Mubarak A/Pool Photo via AP)

"If it is difficult to hold in a complete way, a decision of postponement would be unavoidable," Abe said.

While other countries struggled to contain the virus, the central Chinese city of Wuhan, where the virus outbreak first emerged, said Monday it's now allowing residents limited movement as its months-long lockdown gradually eases.

But even after scientists in London predicted that the pandemic's death toll could easily top 1 million people in the U.S. alone—and that is the best-case scenario—some world leaders were still not yet convinced of the scope of the threat.

Trump suggested that the remedies to fight the pandemic—including worldwide financial pain—may be more harmful than the outbreak itself, and vowed to reassess government restrictions after the 15-day mark of the U.S. shutdown.

"WE CANNOT LET THE CURE BE WORSE THAN THE PROBLEM ITSELF," he tweeted.

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Citation: Hunt for medical gear to fight virus becomes all-consuming (2020, March 23) retrieved 24 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-03-medical-gear-virus-all-consuming.html>

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