

US virus cases pass 500 as California readies for cruise ship arrival

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The number of US coronavirus cases soared past 500 Sunday, including two further deaths, as California braced for the arrival of infected cruise ship passengers and saw a major tennis event canceled.

The surge came as President Donald Trump defended his

administration's "perfectly coordinated" response to the epidemic, after heavy criticism over health cuts and strategic blunders that have failed to stem its rapid spread.

Some 30 US states have been hit by the novel coronavirus, with Oregon the latest to declare an emergency, and 60 million people in California and New York are under crisis measures.

Two more deaths linked to a virus-hit care home near Seattle were reported Sunday, bringing the nationwide toll to at least 21.

A Johns Hopkins tally put the number of confirmed US cases at 554 by Sunday evening, with newly diagnosed patients in states including Pennsylvania, Illinois, Massachusetts, Connecticut and New Jersey.

Medical officers headed for a virus-hit cruise ship stranded off San Francisco to begin screening passengers for an "unprecedented and difficult" landing operation.

The Grand Princess, with 21 confirmed coronavirus infections among 3,500 people on board, is due to dock in nearby Oakland Monday.

The operation to move passengers ashore will take two to three days, said Governor Gavin Newsom.

Passenger quarantine

Carolyn Wright, a passenger on the ship, told AFP that people without symptoms were allowed to leave their cabins for the first time since Thursday.

Once ashore, ill passengers will be moved to hospitals, while Americans not requiring treatment will be quarantined at military bases in

California, Texas and Georgia for 14 days.

Foreign passengers will be repatriated, while crew will remain quarantined on board.

The State Department warned vulnerable people including the elderly "should not travel by cruise ship."

Several public events have been canceled across the US in an effort to contain the epidemic.

The ATP and WTA tennis tournament in Indian Wells was called off on Sunday just days before it was due to begin.

Officials said they opted to cancel after the health department of California's Riverside County declared a public health emergency for the Coachella Valley—in the desert east of Los Angeles—after a confirmed case of COVID-19 locally.

The tournament is one of the biggest outside the four Grand Slams and draws more than 400,000 fans each year.

'Flat-footed'

Trump has defended his record after accusations he peddled misinformation on the outbreak, blaming the media for trying to make his government "look bad."

"We have a perfectly coordinated and fine tuned plan at the White House for our attack on CoronaVirus," he tweeted.

"We moved VERY early to close borders to certain areas, which was a Godsend. V.P. is doing a great job. The Fake News Media is doing

everything possible to make us look bad. Sad!"

But Larry Hogan, the Republican governor of Maryland, criticized Trump, telling NBC the president "hasn't communicated the way I would, and the way I might like him to."

Fellow Republican Ted Cruz, a US senator, revealed he had shaken hands at a conservative conference with a person who later tested positive.

"I have decided to remain at my home in Texas this week, until a full 14 days have passed," he wrote on Facebook, adding he had no symptoms.

Trump and Vice President Mike Pence also attended the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) near Washington last month.

Trump has been heavily rebuked for repeatedly contradicting the advice of his administration's experts in his public pronouncements about the coronavirus.

He has downplayed the threat posed by the epidemic, which has killed more than 3,500 people since emerging in China, suggesting cases were "going very substantially down, not up."

New York Governor Andrew Cuomo said federal health authorities had been "caught flat-footed" and had "handcuffed" the ability of individual states to respond.

"Their messages are all over the place, frankly," he told Fox News.

Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, told Fox News that the possibility of following Italy's example in locking down large sections of the population could

not be ruled out.

"You don't want to alarm people but, given the spread we've seen, anything is possible," he said.

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