Virus death toll soars in locked-down Italy as pace slows in China

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Locked-down Italy on Tuesday recorded its deadliest day of the novel coronavirus outbreak, with its toll jumping by 168, as airlines halted flights and neighbouring countries clamped down on borders of the

worst-hit country outside of China.

Chinese leader Xi Jinping meanwhile sought to ease concerns in the country where the virus was first detected in December, making his first visit to the epicentre of Wuhan and declaring the spread in the central city and Hubei province to be "basically curbed".

On the world's financial markets, stocks and oil bounced back on hopes of US economic stimulus measures, after suffering their biggest one-day losses in more than a decade on Monday.

Official figures showed daily infections in China are at their lowest level since record-keeping began in January, with 19 new infections and 17 deaths recorded on Tuesday, after a similar flatlining of cases in South Korea.

By contrast, Europe's outbreak surged, with Italy's toll rising to 631 dead from the COVID-19 disease caused by the virus, with 10,149 infected in just over two weeks.

Tuesday's toll pushed the total number of deaths outside China past 1,000, hitting 1,115, according an AFP tally.

China remains the hardest hit overall with more than 80,000 cases and over 3,000 deaths out of a global total of 117,339 cases and 4,251 deaths across 105 countries and territories, the tally showed.

Reflecting the differing stages of the outbreak, China relaxed some of its most severe restrictions in Hubei province, the epicentre of the outbreak, at the same moment as several European countries went on full alert mode.

A slew of airlines announced they would cut all flights to Italy for the

next few weeks, including Air France, Air Canada, Ryanair and Easyjet.

A number of European countries also announced the closure of schools and bans on mass public events.

Slovenia said it was closing its border with Italy, while Austria announced bans on trains and flights to the neighbouring country.

In the Middle East, Iran registered 54 new deaths—the highest single-day toll so far in the country with the third deadliest outbreak in the world. A total of 291 people have now died in the Islamic Republic.

In Africa, the Democratic Republic of Congo confirmed its first coronavirus case in the capital Kinshasa, a city of more than 10 million people. The news comes as the DRC hopes to declare next month an end to the 19-month Ebola epidemic that has killed 2,264 people.

'Just the beginning'

Strict lockdowns and travel restrictions were apparently successful in China but faced a rocky start in Italy, a country of 60 million people where Prime Minister Guiseppe Conte told residents they should travel only for the most urgent work or health reasons.

While squares in Milan and Rome were emptied of their usual bustle and traffic, some residents were confused as to whether they were even allowed to leave their homes for everyday tasks like shopping.

The confusion forced the government to clarify its decree and warn against panic-buying.

Pope Francis also seemed to muddy the waters, holding a mass in which he urged priests to go out and visit the sick—something specifically

discouraged by Conte.

Governments elsewhere in Europe were also scrambling to balance their responses between restrictions and pushing out accurate information to avoid panic.

In Geneva, the World Trade Organization said it would suspend all meetings until March 20 after one of its staff members contracted the virus.

Sport schedules have been wrecked across Europe, with Barcelona's Champions League football match against Napoli next Wednesday the latest to fall prey to the virus—it will be played behind closed doors.

In a rare glimmer of positive news, the remaining guests at a hotel in Spain's Canary Islands on lockdown left the building after a 14-day quarantine, to the cheers and applause of hotel workers and medical staff.

But French President Emmanuel Macron provided a reminder of Europe's plight, warning that his country was "just at the beginning" of its outbreak, Europe's second most acute with 1,784 infected and 33 dead.

Officials at risk

In the United States, reports have suggested 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 US could become another hotspot, with at least 26 deaths and 605 confirmed infections so far.

Trump said he would propose "very substantial" economic measures to Congress on Tuesday including tax relief and aid for workers in the gig economy who worry about calling in sick.

In New York, the UN closed its headquarters to the public, while major US universities have been forced to cancel classes and move lessons online.

On the West Coast—where most of the US deaths have occurred—the Grand Princess cruise ship has docked at California's port of Oakland, for more than 2,400 passengers to be taken into treatment or placed in quarantine, in a delicate, days-long operation.

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