New York welcomes hospital ship as coronavirus accelerates

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A hospital ship arrived in New York Monday as America's coronavirus epicenter prepares for the peak of the pandemic, with emergency restrictions extended amid grim warnings about the death toll.

The navy's USNS Comfort, which has space for 1,000 beds and a dozen operating rooms, docked in a Manhattan pier around 11:00 am (1500

GMT) after departing Virginia on Saturday.

Its arrival came after President Donald Trump abandoned his Easter weekend target for life returning to normal in the United States and extended social distancing guidelines until the end of April.

Trump said on Sunday America's death rate was likely to increase for two weeks, describing as "horrible" a prediction by senior scientist Anthony Fauci that COVID-19 could claim up to 200,000 lives.

Worst-affected New York is ramping up hospital capacity and taking delivery of desperately needed medical supplies as it races against time to get ready for its peak number of cases.

"This virus has been ahead of us from day one," Governor Andrew Cuomo told MSNBC Monday, saying projections suggest the pandemic could reach its crest between two and four weeks.

"Prepare for the apex. Have the materials for the apex. That's when the system is going to collapse," he said.

The Comfort will care for New Yorkers requiring [intensive care](link) unrelated to the [coronavirus](link), easing the burden on a hospital network overwhelmed by an influx of COVID-19 patients.

"It will be good for morale," said Mayor Bill de Blasio.

The US now has the highest number of confirmed cases in the world—more than 143,500, according to a running tally by Johns Hopkins University.

The illness has claimed more than 2,500 lives in the country and 776 of those deaths have been in New York, America's financial capital and

most populous city.

The Big Apple is scheduled to open a temporary emergency hospital in the Javits convention center with 2,900 beds on Monday.

Four other sites have also been approved to house patients discharged from hospitals to make way for residents suffering from coronavirus.

Flights run by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the body tasked with responding to disasters, have also begun arriving at New York's JFK Airport.

'Nightmare'

The flights, part of "Project Airbridge," are delivering millions of masks, gowns and thermometers.

Around 50 flights are planned in total, according to the White House.

De Blasio said late Sunday the city has enough medical equipment to last a week but needed "several hundred more ventilators very quickly."

Trump cancelled his plans to re-open much of the US by Easter on April 12 after his top scientists confronted him with data on the rising coronavirus deaths.

Fauci, who leads research into infectious diseases at the National Institutes of Health, said Sunday that between 100,000 and 200,000 Americans could die from "millions of cases."

Trump said the better that Americans obey the emergency guidelines to stay at home "the faster this whole nightmare will end."

"Nothing would be worse than declaring victory before the victory is won," Trump said, adding he expected the country to "be well on our way to recovery" by June 1.

Fauci said he had no trouble convincing Trump to extend the confinement guidelines.

"He looked at the data and he got it right away. It was a pretty clear picture," Fauci told CNN on Monday.

Trump, who initially downplayed COVID-19, has regularly oscillated between stressing the seriousness of the outbreak to talking of the need to get people back to work quickly.

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