

Global virus deaths pass 150,000 as Trump endorses lockdown protests

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Coronavirus deaths have surged past 150,000 worldwide with nearly a quarter of them in the United States, where President Donald Trump lent his support to protesters rallying against lockdown orders.

Evidence is mounting that social distancing successfully slowed the pandemic after more than half of humanity—4.5 billion people—were

confined to their homes.

Governments around the world are now grappling with when and how to ease lockdowns that have crippled the [global economy](#), even as the COVID-19 death toll climbs further in hard-hit countries.

Demonstrators in three US states staged public rallies this week to demand an end to the restrictions, with the largest protest in Michigan attracting 3,000 people—some of whom were armed.

Trump has largely left decisions on easing lockdowns to state officials even as he laid out guidelines for a staged reopening of the national economy.

But his call to "liberate" Michigan, Minnesota and Virginia in a series of tweets Friday were quickly rebuked by the Democratic leaders of all three states.

"I do not have time to involve myself in Twitter wars," said Virginia governor Ralph Northam.

Africa deaths top 1,000

The United States accounts for nearly a third of the 2.25 million [coronavirus](#) infections reported globally.

It has also recorded over 37,000 deaths, more than any other nation, followed by Italy, Spain and France which have all been ravaged by their own outbreaks.

Many countries are testing only the most serious cases and the number of confirmed global cases is likely only a fraction of the true total.

Virtually no corner of the world has been left untouched, with deaths in Africa passing 1,000.

Nigeria announced the death of President Muhammadu Buhari's top aide on Saturday, the highest-profile person to succumb to the virus in Africa's most populous nation.

Meanwhile, many of the world's 260 million Orthodox Christians are preparing to mark Easter without attending church services.

The Russian Orthodox Church has asked the faithful to celebrate at home, even though many places of worship will remain open. Services in Turkey will be closed to the public and broadcast on the internet.

In Zimbabwe, celebrations and mass rallies to mark the country's 40th anniversary of independence from British colonial rule were cancelled.

And Buckingham Palace announced that Queen Elizabeth II will not mark her birthday on Tuesday with a traditional gun salute.

Cover-up claims

China sharply raised its death toll to 4,636 on Friday after adding another 1,290 fatalities for the city of Wuhan, where the respiratory disease first emerged late last year.

Trump, who has angrily shot back at claims he reacted too slowly to the virus threat, has accused Beijing of downplaying the impact of the virus within its borders.

"It is far higher than that and far higher than the U.S., not even close!" he tweeted.

Trump did not offer evidence to back the claim, but pressure has mounted in recent days on Beijing to come clean over its handling of the initial outbreak.

Leaders in France and Britain have also questioned China's management of the crisis but Beijing hit back, saying it had not concealed information about the illness.

Signs that the outbreak could be easing in parts of Europe prompted Switzerland, Denmark and Finland to begin reopening shops and schools this week.

Germany's health minister said Friday that the virus was "under control after 3,400 deaths in his country, which is now beginning the delicate task of lifting some restrictions without triggering a secondary outbreak.

Some small shops will be allowed to reopen Monday, and some children will return to school within weeks.

Parts of Italy also began emerging from lockdown, with Venice residents strolling around quiet canals.

But Spain, where the [death](#) toll topped 20,000 on Saturday, has extended its strict lockdown, while Japan, Britain and Mexico have all expanded their current movement restrictions.

Economic damage

Signs of the economic carnage wrought by the pandemic are mounting, with China reporting its first contraction in GDP since at least the early 1990s after several decades of breakneck growth.

The Trump administration pledged another \$19 billion in relief for

farmers reeling from a massive jolt to the agricultural markets with schools and restaurants shuttered across the country.

Part of the funds will be used to buy up surplus dairy products and produce that farmers have been destroying, unable to get it to consumers or food processors.

"Having to dump milk and plow under vegetables ready to market is not only financially distressing, but it's heartbreaking as well to those who produce them," Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue said.

African state leaders and global financial bodies warned Friday that the continent needed tens of billions of dollars in additional funds to fight the outbreak.

The IMF also warned the virus could spark another "lost decade" in Latin America and backed debt moratoriums to free up spending for the region's fragile economies.

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