

Health or wealth? Nations pressured to loosen virus rules

April 13 2020, by Aritz Parra, Joseph Wilson and Elena Becatoros



Commuters wearing face masks to protect against coronavirus at Atocha train station in Madrid, Spain, Monday, April 13, 2020. Confronting both a public health emergency and long-term economic injury, Spain is cautiously re-starting some business activity to emerge from the nationwide near-total freeze that helped slow the country's grim coronavirus outbreak. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Bernat Armangué)

As the coronavirus throws millions out of work and devastates economies worldwide, governments are struggling with the delicate balance between keeping people safe from a highly contagious disease and making sure they can still make a living or have enough to eat.

Workers in some nonessential industries were returning to their jobs Monday in Spain, one of the hardest hit countries in the pandemic, while in South Korea officials were warning that hard-earned progress fighting the virus could be eroded by new infections as restrictions ease.

The decisions are complicated because each nation is on its own coronavirus arc, with places like Britain, Japan and parts of the United States still seeing increasing daily levels of deaths or infections; France and New York hoping they are stabilizing, albeit at a high plateau of deaths; and nations like Italy and Spain seeing declines in the rates of increase.

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez said his government must balance its response to the virus crisis that "threatens to destroy lives and at the same time destroy the economic and social fabric of our country."

Seeking to restart manufacturing, Spain's government is allowing workers to return to some factory and construction jobs. The country on Monday reported its lowest daily growth in infections in three weeks. Retail stores and services remain closed, and office workers are strongly encouraged to keep working from home. A prohibition on people leaving home for anything other than groceries and medicine will remain for at least two weeks under the state of emergency.



A homeless woman wearing face masks to protect against the coronavirus crosses an empty street in Vilnius, Lithuania, Monday, April 13, 2020. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Mindaugas Kulbis)

But Health Minister Salvador Illa said Monday that the government will move carefully on allowing others to end their self-isolation. He said officials will proceed with "the utmost caution and prudence ... and always based on scientific evidence."

"We're in no position to be setting dates" about when isolation might end. "We can't get ahead of ourselves."

Some health experts and politicians argue that it's premature to ease the lockdown in a nation that has suffered almost 17,500 deaths and

reported more than 169,000 infections, second only to the United States' 557,000 infections.

Italy recorded its lowest daily virus death toll in three weeks at 431, putting its total deaths at over 19,800. In Veneto, one of the country's most infected regions, officials are loosening some restrictions on movement as they enter a phase the governor, Luca Zaia, termed "lockdown light."



A man instructs people, mostly homeless, to maintain social distancing as they distribute relief goods during an enhanced community quarantine to prevent the spread of the new coronavirus in Manila, Philippines on Monday April 13, 2020. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Aaron Favila)

Zaia is expanding the 200-meter from home radius for physical fitness and allowing open-air markets in a new ordinance that takes effect Tuesday. At the same time, the ordinance makes masks or other face coverings mandatory outside the home—not just in supermarkets or on public transportation, as was previously the case.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said Monday that the nation is facing a surge in the number of seriously ill patients and urged officials to mobilize resources for worst-case scenarios. Speaking in a conference call, Putin emphasized the need to prepare for moving medical personnel, ventilators and protective gear between regions to respond to the rapidly changing situation.

Russia has recorded more than 18,000 coronavirus cases and 148 deaths. Moscow and the surrounding region have accounted for about two-thirds of all infections.



People living near the traditional medicine market wait to receive food baskets from private donors, Monday, April 13, 2020 downtown Johannesburg. Because of South Africa's imposed lockdown to contain the spread of COVID-19, many are not able to work. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death.(AP Photo/Jerome Delay)

In Madrid, José Pardinás took a mask being handed out by police as he walked to work at a moving company that was re-starting operations after a three-week halt.

"The company hasn't given us any protective equipment. I'm quite nervous about contracting the virus because my family can't afford more

time without an income," Pardinias said.

Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan, meanwhile, issued a global plea to the world's richer countries and international financial institutions to provide debt-relief for poor countries, where forced lockdowns are crippling already troubled economies and causing widespread hunger for the poor.

His government has launched an ambitious \$8 billion program to help the millions near the poverty level. Khan last week relaxed his country's lockdown to allow the construction industry, which employs the vast majority of Pakistan's daily wage earners, to re-open.



A woman on a bicycle passes a coronavirus graffiti by street artist 'Uzey' showing a nurse as Superwoman, the lettering reads "for the real heroes" on a

wall in Hamm, Germany, on Easter Monday, April 13, 2020. (AP Photo/Martin Meissner)

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who has urged a cautious approach to any loosening of restrictions, will hold a [video conference](#) with regional governors Wednesday, after the governor of the state with the most infections called for a "road map" to return to normality.

Armin Laschet, governor of North Rhine-Westphalia, said "the willingness for restrictions also needs the prospect of normalization." His government came up with a plan for gradually easing the restrictions imposed on March 22, when public gatherings were limited to only two people.

In South Korea, Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun said officials were discussing new public guidelines that would allow for "certain levels of economic and social activity" while also maintaining distance to slow the virus' spread.

South Korea's caseload has slowed from early March, when it was reporting around 500 new daily cases, but officials have warned of a broader "quiet spread" at locations such as bars, which are still open. President Moon Jae-in vowed Monday to focus on saving jobs and protecting the economy amid a sharp increase in the number of people seeking unemployment benefits.



A volunteer disinfects the Karachi Press Club building in an effort to contain the outbreak of the coronavirus, in Karachi, Pakistan, Monday, April 13, 2020. (AP Photo/Fareed Khan)

South Korea's vice health minister, Kim Gang-lip, said a quick return to normality was "virtually impossible" considering the threat of new infections.

"A premature easing (of social distancing) would come at an irrevocable cost, so we should approach the issue very carefully, and invest deep thought into when and how to transition," Kim said.

In Sri Lanka, the government announced plans to reopen schools and universities in May.

The pandemic's new epicenter is now the United States, which has seen more than 22,000 deaths, the world's highest. About half have been in the New York metropolitan area, but hospitalizations are slowing in the state, and other indicators suggest lockdowns and social distancing are working.

U.S. infectious disease expert Dr. Anthony Fauci said parts of the country could gradually reopen as early as next month.



Health officials, wearing protective face masks and suits as a preventive measure against the spread of the coronavirus, perform local region dances during an impromptu ceremony to send off people after spending a two-week mandatory quarantine at a university dormitory, in Burdur, southwestern Turkey, Monday April 13, 2020. One hundred fifty one Turkish citizens that travelled back from Russia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, were sent to their homes in 32 different

cities, after they were placed under quarantine on March 29. Six people who are positive with Covid-19 are treated at the local hospital. (Mesut Madan/DHA via AP)

In Britain, the death toll passed 10,600. Prime Minister Boris Johnson, the first major world leader to test positive for the virus, paid an emotional tribute to the country's National Health Service after leaving the hospital on Sunday. Johnson, who spent three nights in intensive care, especially thanked two nurses who stood by his bedside for 48 hours "when things could have gone either way."

Japan, the world's third-biggest economy, has seen new infections climb rapidly and now has 7,255 confirmed cases. Japanese companies have been slow to switch to working remotely and many people are still commuting, even after a state of emergency was declared for seven prefectures, including Tokyo.

To encourage people to stay home, the Japanese government released a video showing Prime Minister Shinzo Abe cuddling his dog, reading a book and clicking a remote control at home, but the message drew scathing criticism on social media.



Members of Hevra Kadisha, an organization which prepares bodies of deceased Jews for burial according to Jewish tradition, lower the body of Israel's ex-Chief Rabbi Eliahu Bakshi-Doron who died from coronavirus, during his funeral in Jerusalem, Monday, April 13, 2020. (AP Photo/Oded Balilty)



A doctor checks the temperature of a girl in Dharavi, one of Asia's largest slums, during lockdown to prevent the spread of the new coronavirus in Mumbai, India, Monday, April 13, 2020. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Rafiq Maqbool)



A passenger sits at Barcelona airport, Spain, Monday, April 13, 2020. Confronting both a public health emergency and long-term economic injury, Spain is cautiously re-starting some business activity to emerge from the nationwide near-total freeze that helped slow the country's grim coronavirus outbreak. (AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti)



Flower shop employees cut unsold flowers in St. Petersburg, Russia, Monday, April 13, 2020. The flowers were destroyed after flower shops in St. Petersburg were closed according to the order of the city authorities to close non-grocery stores to limit people shopping due to the spread of coronavirus. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Dmitri Lovetsky)



Medical staff members arrive for a duty shift at Dongsan Medical Center in Daegu, South Korea, Monday, April 13, 2020. 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. (Kim Do-hoon/Yonhap via AP)



A British national shows her documents to an official as she arrives to board a special chartered flight to London during lockdown to control the spread of the new coronavirus in Ahmedabad, India, Monday, April 13, 2020. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Ajit Solanki)



A motorist, white helmet, offers free face masks to locals to help curb the spread of the coronavirus in Bangkok, Thailand on Monday, April 13, 2020. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Sakchai Lalit)



A woman wearing a protective mask walks along a street during enhanced community quarantine to prevent the spread of the new coronavirus in Manila, Philippines on Monday April 13, 2020. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Aaron Favila)



A Kashmiri milkman cycles past volunteers preventing outsiders from entering an area declared red zone by government in Srinagar, Indian controlled Kashmir, Monday, April 13, 2020. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Dar Yasin)

Infections also spiked in Indonesia, the world's fourth-most populous country, where President Joko Widodo pledged to be more transparent about the coronavirus. Last month, Widodo admitted he deliberately held back information about the virus' spread to prevent panic. On Monday, he asked his ministers and the COVID-19 task force to be transparent with the public.

Indonesia has more than 4,500 confirmed infections and nearly 400 deaths, Asia's highest recorded number of fatalities after China.

More than 1.8 million [coronavirus](#) infections have been reported and over 114,000 people have died worldwide, according to Johns Hopkins University. The figures understate the true size and toll of the pandemic, due to limited testing, uneven counting of the dead and deliberate under-counting by some governments.

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