

# Virus deaths top 250,000 as billions pledged for vaccine push

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The global death toll from the coronavirus pandemic topped a quarter of a million on Tuesday, with the US government predicting a further surge in fatalities as an international vaccine drive garnered \$8 billion in

pledges.

The dire forecast from the United States came as much of the Western world emerged from weeks of lockdown, with hopes that the disease may have peaked in Europe after nearly two months of confinement.

Financial markets saw a light at the end of a tunnel as businesses in Europe and the United States tentatively reopened, and stocks and oil prices rallied Tuesday.

But the global progress did little to cool a war of words between the US and China—fuelled by American claims the virus originated in a Chinese laboratory, a theory the World Health Organization (WHO) labelled "speculative."

Since the disease first surfaced in China late last year the number of confirmed cases has reached almost 3.6 million while fatalities have topped 251,000.

Europe remains the hardest-hit continent with around 145,000 deaths while the US has recorded close to 68,700, the biggest single-country toll.

## **Russia is Europe's new hotspot**

The bleak figures were compounded Monday by an internal government estimate in Washington that forecast the COVID-19 infection rate in the US could surge eight-fold to 200,000 a day by June 1, and the daily death toll could rise to 3,000.

And Russia has emerged as a new coronavirus hotspot. It is now the European country reporting the highest number of new infections, with a total of over 155,000 cases.

"The threat is apparently on the rise," Moscow mayor Sergei Sobyenin has warned, urging residents to respect confinement rules in the capital.

The lockdown has however had one worrying impact—reported cases of domestic violence in Russia have more than doubled.

Elsewhere in Europe, Germany's biggest state Bavaria said it would allow restaurants to open from mid-May, with pressure growing on Chancellor Angela Merkel to ease stay-at-home measures that have plunged the economy into a deep recession.

## **'Global solidarity'**

As the race is on to find a way to stamp out the virus, a special telethon backed by the WHO but snubbed by Washington pulled in \$8.1 billion to support international efforts to develop a vaccine.

"This was a powerful and inspiring demonstration of global solidarity," said WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

Seeming to defend its non-participation, the State Department insisted the United States is "leading" the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and said it has spent more than \$1 billion together with US drug companies to work on a vaccine.

But the White House has stepped up an offensive against China, with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo saying there is "enormous evidence" the virus emerged in a lab in the Chinese city of Wuhan.

That claim was rejected Monday by the WHO as well as top US epidemiologist and government adviser Anthony Fauci.

"Everything about the stepwise evolution over time strongly indicates

that (this virus) evolved in nature and then jumped species," he said.

US President Donald Trump has acknowledged that deaths will go beyond his earlier prediction of 60,000, saying: "We're going to lose anywhere from 75, 80 to 100,000 people."

His estimate underscored the tough, politically-tinged debate over reopening, which pits concerns about a rising death toll against the need to restore national economies shattered by prolonged shutdowns.

On Monday US manufacturing giant General Electric announced it will cut an additional 10,000 jobs from its aviation sector as the pandemic decimates the industry.

The economic fallout prompted the US Treasury to announce it will borrow a record \$3 trillion in the April-June period, largely to finance spending on virus relief programmes.

In Australia officials said the economy is losing Aus\$4 billion (US\$2.5 billion) every week the shutdown continues, with GDP forecast to plunge 10 percent in the June quarter.

## **'Joy and fear'**

Across Europe, millions of people revelled at being able to return to the outdoors, mixed with a dose of trepidation about life ahead and the economic damage wreaked by lockdowns.

Workers banged away at construction sites in Rome, police handed out masks in Madrid and older children returned to school in Vienna.

"We are feeling a mix of joy and fear," 40-year-old Stefano Milano said in Rome.

As France prepares to lift its shutdown next week, the Paris mayor has announced that some busy roads will be reserved for bicycles to try to limit the crowds on public transport.

In India, police had to wade in to separate people jostling to buy alcohol for the first time in 40 days as the world's biggest lockdown eased.

New Delhi said it has also embarked on a "massive" operation involving naval ships and aircraft to bring back some of the hundreds of thousands of Indian nationals stuck in the Maldives and United Arab Emirates.

Hong Kong announced plans to ease major social distancing measures, including by reopening schools, cinemas, bars and beauty parlours after the Chinese territory largely halted local transmission of the virus.

And in a ray of hope for the sports world, South Korea's baseball players returned to action, albeit to empty stadiums.

Friday will also see the delayed start of the country's football K-League, and next week some of golf's leading women players will tee up in a domestic tournament as South Korea becomes a rare hotspot for live sport.

But in Britain, sports leaders warned of the "catastrophic" impact of the virus, with football, cricket and rugby counting the cost of delayed or cancelled tournaments and leagues.

Culture of a different kind was providing a balm for people in Washington, where French harmonica player Frederic Yonnet is putting on regular two-hour concerts for free for people gathering outside his home.

Wanda Evans, basking in the music from her car, said: "There's still art,

there's still talent, there's still beauty to be shared in this world."

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