

EU wrestles with virus rescue plan as China battles new outbreak

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Chinese authorities have linked a new cluster a food market in Beijing

EU leaders on Friday debated a giant post-coronavirus recovery plan as China raced to prevent a second wave that it said may have originally come from Europe.

The disease was meanwhile already present in Italy as far back as December, experts said, underscoring the difficulty of tracking and containing the pandemic.

But with the world trying to both limit the economic pain of COVID-19 even as it guards against a resurgence, top US expert Dr Anthony Fauci offered a ray of hope as he said he did not see America returning to fresh lockdown.

The disease has so far killed 450,000 people and infected 8.4 million people worldwide, as well as causing historic levels of economic disruption as countries and continents shut down to stop its spread.

'Warm-up round'

Many European countries began reopening this month after painful lockdowns that devastated economies. Europe also remains the hardest-hit continent with over 190,000 deaths.

Facing the biggest recession in the EU's history, leaders held a virtual summit on the European Commission's proposal for a 750 billion euro (\$840 billion) rescue fund.

The plan is seen as a key gesture of solidarity and unity for the troubled bloc.



After a three-month hiatus for the coronavirus pandemic, football returned to South America Thursday in Brazil

But opposition is fierce from the "frugal four"—Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark and Austria—who have promised to fight to rein in spending.

On the other side are countries such as Italy and Spain that were the first and hardest hit by the pandemic, having already been crippled by overstretched finances.

"It is clear that we expect no essential agreements at this summit," said a German government official, with a French source describing it as "warm-up round".

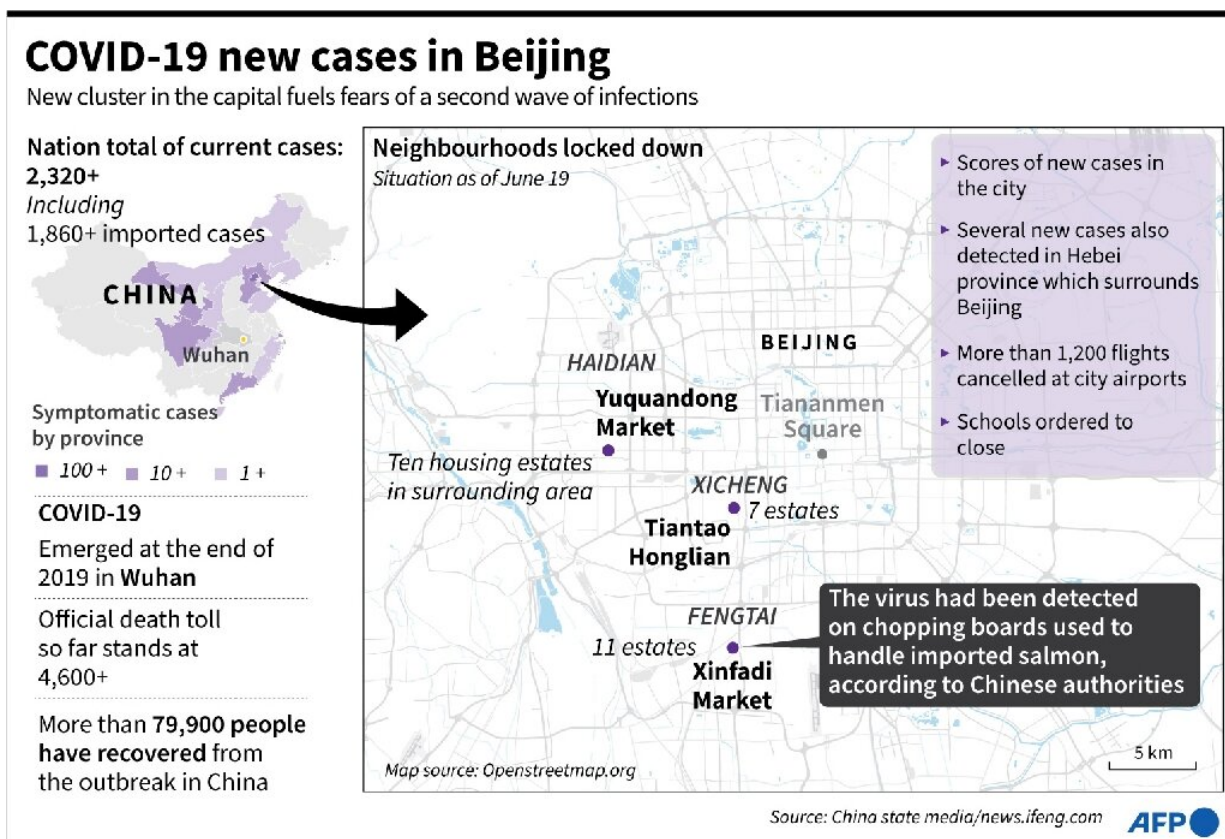
Leaders are instead likely to land a compromise in late July, as urged by German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

'Came from Europe'

China, where the disease first publicly emerged in December last year, has been cracking down on a fresh outbreak in the capital Beijing.

Authorities launched a nationwide campaign to inspect food imports after a cluster at a food market in Beijing. Tens of thousands of people are also being tested while neighbourhoods have been locked down and schools closed.

The resurgence came after China had largely brought the virus under control and eased restrictions on movement inside the country.



COVID-19 new cases in Beijing

Chinese authorities said studies of genome data, which it had shared with the World Health Organization, suggest the new outbreak in Beijing "came from Europe", but is different from what is currently spreading there.

"It is older than the virus currently circulating in Europe," Zhang Yong of the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said.

He raised the possibility of the virus lurking in imported frozen food or in the wholesale market itself, resulting in similarities to older strains.

Italian sewage

Chinese scientists have said the virus likely emerged in a market that sold wildlife in the central city of Wuhan in December, but Beijing officials have recently suggested that it may have originated elsewhere.

In Italy, a study by the national health institute said the coronavirus was present in two cities in the north in December, over two months before the first case was discovered there.

Researchers discovered genetic traces of SARS-CoV-2—as the virus is officially known—in samples of waste water collected in Milan and Turin at the end of last year, and Bologna in January, the institute said Thursday.

The results "help to understand the start of the circulation of the virus in

Italy," the ISS said.

Italy was the first European country to be hit by the virus and the first in the world to impose a nationwide lockdown. It has recorded over 34,500 deaths.



A lockdown was reimposed on 15 million people in southern India as the number of coronavirus infections soared

'Better control'

The United States still leads the world in the number of confirmed infections and deaths, with the fatality toll approaching 120,000.

Its economy has also been brutalised with layoffs topping 45.7 million, putting pressure on US President Donald Trump as he seeks re-election in November.

But Trump's infectious diseases tsar Fauci said in an interview with AFP that the US does not need more widespread lockdowns.

He predicted it would instead focus on "trying to better control those areas of the country that seem to be having a surge of cases".

Fauci added he was optimistic the world would soon have a vaccine to end the pandemic, calling early trial results "encouraging".

French kissing

Normality is returning to cultural and sporting events disrupted by the virus.

Football returned to hard-hit South America on Thursday after a three-month hiatus with a Rio state tournament match in Brazil.



On the table at the virtual EU summit is a proposal from European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen massive rescue fund

And In France, nation of le grand amour, actors have started kissing again on film shoots.

"No, the kiss is not over with," French culture minister Franck Riester declared when asked if social distancing was in danger of killing off love scenes altogether.

Actors must however be tested before they start smooching again.

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