

International

Australia posts record number of new coronavirus infections

'Australia entering a critical new phase,' Authorities warn

MELBOURNE: Australia reported a record 502 new coronavirus infections yesterday, nearly four months after the epidemic initially peaked, with authorities warning the country was entering a critical new phase. Most of the new cases were reported in the southeastern state of Victoria, where authorities have struggled to bring an outbreak in Melbourne under control despite an almost two-week lockdown in Australia's second-biggest city. Australia's new coronavirus infections previously peaked on March 28 when 459 cases were reported, according to data compiled by AFP.

Australia had since appeared to bring the virus under control and had eased restrictions. Like neighboring New Zealand, it had won plaudits for its pandemic response. Victoria Premier Daniel Andrews announced 484 new cases and

two more deaths in the state yesterday, bringing its total of active cases to just over 3,400. Australia has now recorded almost 13,000 cases of the virus and 128 fatalities in a country of about 25 million.

Melbourne residents will be required to wear masks outside from midnight-making the city the first place in Australia to mandate face coverings in public-in a new effort to slow the virus spread. But Andrews said "further behavior change" would still be required after analysis showed almost nine in 10 people recently diagnosed with coronavirus did not self-isolate between feeling sick and getting tested. Just

over half of the new patients also failed to stay at home while waiting for their test results, he added, saying authorities believed insecure work conditions were a key driver of the trend.

Andrews said casual workers across a range of industries, who do not get sick-leave provisions, were worried about "feeding their kids, paying their bills", but could apply for a Aus\$1,500 (\$1,070) hardship payment if they contract the virus. There are growing fears about the virus spreading through vulnerable

populations after outbreaks at several nursing homes, while inmates at six prisons have been confined to their cells after a guard tested positive. The outbreak has left Australia rattled and dampened hopes of a speedy economic recovery.

'Most critical'

An inquiry into how the virus spread in Melbourne heard this week that many cases were likely linked to infection control breaches at hotels used to quarantine residents returning from overseas. Victoria has effectively been sealed off from the rest of the country in an effort to contain the virus, but new cases have been detected in neighboring New South Wales state.

New South Wales Premier Gladys Berejiklian described the coming weeks as "the most critical" since the height of the last lockdown, when the state held the mantle of Australia's hardest-hit region. Several clusters have emerged in Sydney, which health offi-



Virus death toll mounts

Bangladesh in crisis; South Asia battles monsoon rains

DHAKA: Deadly flooding will persist in Bangladesh for the next 10 days, officials warned yesterday, as South Asia battles torrential monsoon rains which have already pounded the region for weeks. In flood-prone Bangladesh-where almost one-third of the impoverished nation is underwater-officials warned of an extended disaster in one of the worst deluges in recent years. "The flood has been going on for at least 20 days," the deputy chief of Bangladesh's Flood Forecasting and Warning Centre, Uday Raihan, told AFP, adding that flooding usually lasted two weeks. "And it is likely continue for another 10 days due to heavy rains in Bangladesh and India."

The annual monsoon is critical for replenishing water supplies, but also wreaks havoc across vast swathes of the densely populated region, causing widespread death and damage. At least 81 people have died in Bangladesh, mostly from drowning, officials said, with almost three million people hit by the

natural disaster through flooded homes and inundated communities. In Srinagar, a rural town just outside the capital Dhaka, some villagers fled to evacuation centers while others slept on boats and rafts made out of banana trunks lashed together with ropes to watch over their flooded homes.

"The last time we saw such flood was in 1998. We haven't seen such dangerous floods since then," Sheikh Moslem, 66, told AFP. Sufia Begum, 40, said the flood levels were up to her neck. "I am more worried about my two cows," she told AFP as she looked at her submerged home and cowshed. "They are my only source of income. I can't leave them here." In India's northeastern state of Assam, conditions eased as the death toll since the start of July edged up to 58 people.

Many villagers whose homes were not fully submerged said they preferred to stay with their belongings despite the difficult conditions, and were being given food and water supplies from the government and local aid agencies. "There is ankle-deep water inside our home. We will stay here until it's not manageable," Anima Begum, 40, told AFP from the Morigaon district in Assam. At Assam's World Heritage-listed Kaziranga National Park, 116 animals have died so far, including nine rare one-horned rhinos.

In neighboring Nepal, the government issued a fresh warning about rising river levels for the next

China says US ordered closure of Houston consulate

BEIJING: The United States has ordered China to close its Houston consulate, Beijing said yesterday, marking a dramatic escalation in diplomatic tensions between the feuding superpowers. The move comes as the world's two biggest economies have crossed swords on a growing number of fronts, from trade to Beijing's handling of the coronavirus pandemic and its policies in Hong Kong, Xinjiang and the South China Sea.

"China urges the US to immediately withdraw its wrong decision, or China will definitely take a proper and necessary response," said foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin, adding Beijing was told Tuesday that the consulate would have to close. "It is a political provocation unilaterally launched by the US side, which seriously violates international law... and the bilateral consular agreement between China and the US," Wang said.

He added that China "strongly condemns" the "outrageous and unjustified move which will sabotage China-US relations". According to local media in Houston, firefighters and police were called to the consulate building on Tuesday evening on reports that documents were being burned in the building's courtyard. The Twitter feed of the Houston police force said smoke was observed, but officers "were not granted access to enter the building".

Diplomatic row

The Chinese Consulate in Houston was opened in 1979 - the first in the year the US and the People's Republic of China established diplomatic relations, according to its website. The website says the office covers eight southern US states-including Texas and Florida-and has nearly one million people in the area registered at the consulate.

There are five Chinese consulates in the US, as well as an embassy in Washington. President Donald Trump's administration has ramped up pressure on China on a wide range of issues, imposing sanctions on Chinese officials over policies in Tibet and Xinjiang. The United States has led denunciations of the treatment of Muslim minorities in Xinjiang, a far west region where an estimated one million Uighurs and other ethnic groups are believed to have been held in re-education camps. —AFP

Chatbots, motorbikes: Southeast Asia's HIV centers adapt to virus

BANGKOK: Five days after a coronavirus lockdown was imposed in Manila, charity LoveYourself hired 20 former motorcycle taxi riders, gave them a crash course on HIV and sent them off to deliver life-saving medication after signing confidentiality agreements. The restrictions on movement and a lack of public transport in the city meant many of the charity's 6,000 clients could not get to its centers for medication, tests and other services, said LoveYourself senior program manager Danvic Rosadino. The centre also added more staff to run its hotline and social media platforms, introduced chatbots, and launched a pilot self-test program so people at risk could test for HIV in their homes, he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. "Everyone was anxious - about getting COVID, but also about not having access to HIV medication and other services. So we had to act quickly to ensure none of our essential services were disrupted at this crucial time," he said.

"At the same time, maintaining confidentiality was very important: medications were packed in plain brown paper bags, drivers were discreet and sometimes met clients outside their homes if they didn't want deliveries at home." Lockdowns globally have prevented people with HIV from getting treatment - and potentially putting their compromised immune systems at risk if they contract COVID-19, according to HIV/AIDS groups concerned about a surge in infections after the coronavirus.

They also faced harassment from authorities, and fear that the collection of health data in relation to the coronavirus will expose their HIV status and open them up to more discrimination. "During the lockdown, people had to show identity documents and doctor's notes to get their medication," said Richard Bragado, program head of the People Living With HIV Response Centre in Manila. "That made their HIV status public, and led to some instances of harassment and public shaming," he said.

Missing targets

About 38 million people worldwide are currently infected with HIV, with the AIDS pandemic killing nearly 35 million people worldwide since it began in the 1980s. In the Asia-Pacific region, about 5.8 million people are living with HIV, with 3.5 million on antiretroviral (ARV) treatment that helps lower viral levels so the virus is not transmissible and prevent full-blown AIDS. Thailand had



MELBOURNE: People wearing face masks cross the normally busy Burke Street Mall in Melbourne. — AFP

cial believe sprung up after an infected man from Melbourne visited a popular pub. "We are not out of the woods by any stretch, quite the opposite," Berejiklian told a press conference. "We remain on high alert and we have some level of anxiety as to the extent of community transmission."

Berejiklian said new restrictions would come into force Friday to tighten rules for bars, cafes, weddings

and funerals, warning they could still be extended further. "A lack of compliance now has made us go down the compulsory path and we don't apologize for that," she said. New South Wales reported 16 new cases yesterday, with one each also detected in Queensland and South Australia states. No significant outbreaks have been detected in less-populated regions for weeks. — AFP



DHAKA: A man rides a cycle rickshaw through a water-logged street after a heavy downpour in Dhaka. — AFP

three days as rescuers searched for 51 people missing in landslides and floods. "Rescue and relief efforts are going on and we are on alert for areas at risk," Nepal's National Emergency Operation Centre chief Murari Wasti said. At least 84 people have died in Nepal as multiple landslides ravaged the Himalayan nation's hill districts while incessant rainfall since Sunday has inundated parts of the southern plains. —AFP



BANGKOK: A traditional Thai tuk tuk drives under a heavy downpour on a street in Bangkok. — AFP

about 470,000 people living with HIV last year, according to UNAIDS. The Philippines had nearly 100,000 cases, while Indonesia reported 640,000 in 2018. The lockdowns and border closures imposed to stop COVID-19 are impacting the production and distribution of medicine, leading to supply issues and cost increases, and stalling progress on new infections, according to UNAIDS.

"In the last decade, declines in new HIV infections have stalled in Asia Pacific, although declines have been reported in some Southeast Asian countries," said Eamonn Murphy, director of the UNAIDS regional support team for Asia and the Pacific. "Key 2020 global targets will be missed - COVID-19 risks exacerbating the situation." The loss of jobs and income is partly responsible. The International Labor Organization estimates that nearly half the world's workforce is at risk of losing livelihoods.

SWING, a Thai HIV non-profit for sex workers, began providing meals to some of the estimated 200,000 sex workers who had no income during the lockdown, said co-founder Surang Janyam. Many also lost their homes, she said. In a survey in April of young people living with HIV in Asia Pacific, nearly half the respondents said lockdowns had led to a loss of jobs and income - particularly for sex workers, daily-wage earners and those in entertainment and hospitality. Of those on ARV treatments, about half said the lockdowns had posed a challenge in getting their medication, with nearly a fifth saying they did not have refills on hand. Many said they also experienced delays or disruptions in accessing HIV prevention services and psychological support. In Bangkok's Pulse Clinic, which provides HIV services, founder Deyn Natthakhet Yaemim ramped up home deliveries of medications and test kits, as well as online counseling. —Reuters

News in brief

Mumbai deploys 'smart helmets'

MUMBAI: As coronavirus infections climb in Mumbai, authorities in India's worst-hit city are turning to high-tech "smart helmets" to speed up screenings and identify suspected cases in the financial capital's densely-populated slums. The portable thermoscanners-previously deployed in Dubai, Italy and China-enable health workers to record the temperatures of dozens of residents per minute and could emerge as a key weapon in Mumbai's quest to eradicate the virus from the city of 18 million. "Traditional screening methods take a lot of time. You go to a slum with 20,000 people and it takes you three hours to screen 300 people," said Neelu Jain, a medical volunteer affiliated with the non-profit group Bharatiya Jain Sanghatana. "But when you use these helmets, all you have to do is ask people to come out of their homes, face them and you can screen 6,000 people in two-and-a-half hours," she said. — AFP

Facebook slaps disclaimer

WASHINGTON: Facebook placed an informational disclaimer Tuesday on a post from President Donald Trump claiming mail-in voting would lead to a "corrupt" election. The move, without removing the post, appears to follow through on the social network giant's pledge to step up efforts to fight misinformation, including from world leaders, shifting slightly from its hands-off policy on political speech. Trump wrote on his page that mail-in voting, unless changed by the courts, "will lead to the most CORRUPT ELECTION in our Nation's History!" and added the hashtag #RIGGEDELECTION. Facebook added an information tag which said, "Get official voting info on how to vote in the 2020 US Election" with a link to the government-sponsored USA.gov page on how to cast ballots. —AFP

Residents urged to stay home

TOKYO: Tokyo's governor yesterday urged residents of the Japanese capital to stay at home during an upcoming four-day holiday weekend, as the number of new local coronavirus cases surged. The city is on its highest coronavirus alert level, with experts warning infections appear to be spreading rapidly and widely. "The infections are spreading not only among young people but also among middle-aged and older people," Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike said during a meeting with infectious disease experts. "I'd like to ask (Tokyo residents) to refrain from going out as much as possible, especially elderly people and those with pre-existing conditions," she said ahead of the holiday weekend. Tokyo hit a new daily record of 293 cases last week, and the figure has stayed above 200 in recent days. — AFP

'Middleman' suffers knife injuries

VALLETTA: The self-confessed middleman in the murder of Maltese anti-corruption journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia was in critical condition yesterday with knife injuries to his throat and torso, authorities and local media said. Melvin Theuma, a former taxi driver, was granted a presidential pardon in November to reveal all about the car bomb murder which shocked in the Mediterranean island in October 2017. His evidence so far has implicated top businessman Yorgen Fenech, the alleged mastermind who was arrested in late November and accused of complicity in the murder. —Reuters