

International

Returning to COVID-19 frontlines, healed caregivers remain uneasy

9,000 health care workers sickened by the virus

WASHINGTON: After spending three weeks in isolation, Justin Jara returns to work Tuesday at his hospital in Detroit, but he doesn't have a lot of faith in the test that showed he now has antibodies against the new coronavirus. "I still have fear, I am scared to go back to work," the 26-year-old nurse said. "A doctor told me that I'm immune and I have antibodies but still, it's not scientifically proven yet."

Across the United States, some 9,000 health care workers have been sickened by the virus that causes COVID-19, and more than two dozen have died, according to official figures released last week. The rest, like Jara, have recovered and - as they make their way back to work - are entering a world of unknowns. So far, there is no proven treatment or vaccine for SARS-CoV-2, and scientists don't know whether it has long-term impacts on the lungs, kidneys or other organs. Does infection confer immunity? And if so, will that immunity be seasonal, like for colds, or life-long, like for measles?

Many caregivers don't have the option of working from home. They're needed back on the front-line, in many cases at the same place where they contracted the virus. Jara fell ill in late March, back at a time when it wasn't deemed necessary for the nurses in his unit to wear protective gear because it was a so-called "clean unit" with no coronavirus patients. One patient, however, turned out to be infected despite a negative test result. Jara recovered at home, riding out the high fever, muscle aches and shortness of breath that characterize mild cases.



But he is heading back to a hospital that has completely changed. The 35 beds in his unit are taken up exclusively by COVID-19 patients. He had to learn, online, how to use the new and omnipresent oxygen machines. A new rule states that nurses can only enter rooms a few times per day, barring an emergency, in order to limit the risk of spread. And personal protective equipment is an absolute must: masks, face shields, gowns and gloves. "I'm going to probably be really cautious to prevent reinfection for myself," Jara said.

Protecting loved ones

More than a month after he got infected, Richard Whelan, a 63-year-old colorectal surgeon in New York, doesn't even know whether he has antibodies against the virus. The so-called serological test isn't widely available in America's most populous city, the world's worst-hit hotspot, as it is in Detroit where Jara lives. Whelan was bed-ridden for 12 days, leaving him "wiped out." His hospital, Lenox Hill, has canceled all elec-

tive procedures, and the doctor is assisting in a 24-bed COVID unit.

Like everyone else, he wears a mask and a gown. "I don't want to contaminate my wife and my daughter," Whelan says. He's also uncertain about his own recovery, given that his age places him in a vulnerable category. "I'm not willing to give a blood donation of my plasma right now because I need them," says Whelan, as New York organizes plasma collections from recovered patients as a form of experimental therapy for those who still have the disease.

looking abroad to purchase it.

Speaking after his first personal meeting with Trump since the health crisis began, Cuomo acknowledged that the testing itself is the responsibility of individual states. "But we need help from the federal government to make the supply chain work for the manufacturers, on the reagents, test kits, et cetera, and we said that we'd like to work together in New York state to take our current rate of testing—we do about 20,000 tests a day on average—and double that. Go to 40,000."

"It's a very aggressive goal, and we said that we would work together to meet that goal, so it was a very good conversation," said Cuomo. Cuomo also said he regretted that a new \$480-billion relief package that was passed by the Senate Tuesday leaves out a key Democratic demand: extra funding for state and local governments battling the pandemic. "We mentioned briefly the state aid. We talked about that, Governor Cuomo and I, and I agree with him on that. I think most Republicans agree with that," Trump said at his daily briefing on the pandemic.

Trump said earlier in the day he wants such funding included in the next coronavirus rescue package, and congressional leaders said the forthcoming bill was already in the works. The presi-

are likely to have died, from the virus. As well as the threat of depression and anxiety faced by billions of people under social isolation orders worldwide, health professionals on the front line must deal with death and the high risk of contagion every day.

Tai chi

"This is a time that is really testing our resilience," said Jonathan Ripp, an internist at New York's network of eight Mount Sinai hospitals. Ripp, the co-author of a study that seeks to understand anxiety among medical staff during the pandemic and which was published this month in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*, said medical staff concerns are numerous. "Are we going to have enough equipment? How am I going to get to work? Who's going to take care of my kids?" he told AFP, citing some of the worries. "How am I going to be prepared to take care of patients in a setting that I'm not used to... What if I'm dealing with patients who are critically ill, who are dying?" Ripp added. In an attempt to help its staff, Mount Sinai provides answers to questions on a dedicated website, created a 24-hour mental health hotline, runs virtual support groups, and offers meditation, yoga, and tai chi classes.

Mental health professionals also contact staff to ask how they are feeling. Heather Isola, a physician

and Iran - in 177th and 173rd place respectively - of censoring major coronavirus outbreaks.

Alluding to accusations that Beijing concealed the initial extent of the outbreak, it said China "maintains its system of information hyper-control, whose negative effects for the entire world have been seen during the coronavirus public health crisis", Europe has also not been immune - Hungary, under Prime Minister Viktor Orban, has passed a special law on false information which was a "completely disproportionate and coercive measure".

RSF said there was a "clear correlation" between suppression of media freedom in response to the coronavirus pandemic and a country's ranking in the index. While Norway topped the index for the fourth year in a row, Finland was again the runner-up. North Korea took last position from Turkmenistan, and Eritrea continued to be Africa's lowest-ranked country at number 178. The third biggest leap was by Sudan, which rose 16 places to 159th after the removal of president Omar al-Bashir. France lost two places to rank 32nd, with journal-



WASHINGTON: Nurses protest against the lack of personal protection equipment amid the covid-19 pandemic in front of the White House in Washington, DC. —AFP

"I need my antibodies to protect me." On the other side of the country, in Seattle, emergency department nurse Terry West recalls a sense of "relief" at being among the first wave of those infected and recovered. The 55-year-old went back to work on April 5. But she cannot feel completely at ease given that her husband is a lung cancer survivor, making him vulnerable to the disease. "We always gown up, we always glove up, we always wear a mask. I don't want to tempt fate," says West, who had only moderate symptoms.

Even if the chances of reinfection are considered low, she doesn't want to bring home virus particles on her clothes and in her hair. There is one area where she is willing to take some risk. She regular volunteers to take care of patients considered more likely to spread the disease because the "BiPAP" oxygen machines they are on release their exhaled air into the room. "If you're unsure and you have little kids at home or you have elderly people living with you, I'm willing to step forward and go in," she said. —AFP

Cuomo presses Trump for more federal help in coronavirus testing

WASHINGTON: New York Governor Andrew Cuomo pressed President Donald Trump Tuesday for more help from the federal government to carry out coronavirus testing during a face-to-face meeting he described as cordial and productive after weeks of sometimes nasty exchanges. As the virus death toll in the US keeps rising and now stands at nearly 45,000, widespread testing is viewed as key to states being able to lift stay-at-home orders and reopen their shuttered economies.

Cuomo said his state, the hardest hit in America by the pandemic, wants to double its daily testing rate quickly and pressed Trump for the federal government to take control of the supply chain for reagents and other medical equipment to carry out the tests. The goal is to spare states from bidding against each other on the open market to acquire the material, as they have been doing, or

Coronavirus takes mental toll on New York medical staff

NEW YORK: Battling to keep intensive care patients alive at a hospital in one of New York City's worst-affected coronavirus neighborhoods is taking a toll on nurse Debbie Sanchez's mental health. "I have extreme anxiety," said Sanchez, who has been working 12-hour shifts covered head-to-toe in protective clothing since New York became the epicenter of America's COVID-19 outbreak last month. Sanchez, 57, was working in the emergency room at Montefiore Hospital in the Bronx when she was moved to help the facility's overwhelmed intensive care unit.

She is not a trained ICU nurse and lives in fear she will make a mistake. Sanchez also hasn't seen her granddaughter in over a month for fear of infecting her. "The whole thing of changing your whole life is what's stressful. I have a hard time sleeping," she admitted to AFP. New York state accounts for around a third of America's 42,500 COVID-19 deaths. More than 14,000 people in New York City have died, or

Coronavirus 'amplifies press freedom threats'

PARIS: The coronavirus pandemic is exacerbating threats to press freedom around the world, with authoritarian states including China and Iran suppressing details of the outbreak, activists said. Paris-based Reporters Without Borders (RSF) said in its annual press freedom rankings the pandemic was "highlighting and amplifying the many crises" already casting a shadow on press freedom.

The outbreak had encouraged some regimes to "take advantage of the fact people are stunned and mobilisation has weakened to impose measures that would be impossible to adopt in normal times", RSF secretary general Christophe Deloire said. The rankings saw few major changes from last year, with Nordic countries regarded as the most free and isolated states Turkmenistan and North Korea footing the list of 180 countries. RSF accused China



NEW YORK: A person crosses the street at very quiet Times Square in New York City. During his daily coronavirus (COVID-19) briefing, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo said the death toll dropped below 500 in a 24 hour period for the first time since the peak of the pandemic. —AFP

dent also had positive words for Cuomo. "I can say very honestly, with New York state and New York City, they've been terrific to work with," he said. Trump's administration is keen to get Americans back to work and has said there are enough tests for each state to move to "phase one" of a gradual reopening, ending some stay-at-home restrictions. —AFP



NEW YORK: Medical workers hold signs outside NYU Langone Health hospital as people applaud to show their appreciation to medical staff and essential workers on the front lines of the coronavirus pandemic in New York City. —AFP

assistant who oversees 900 colleagues, said her worst day was when one of them was diagnosed with COVID-19 and was hospitalized in a serious condition. "It was probably the peak of the disease as well and the peak in the hospital so that was the breaking day," recalled the 36-year-old. "The same thing every day... is draining," she added. —AFP

ists in the country sometimes the victims of police violence at demonstrations, it said. Published annually by RSF since 2002, the World Press Freedom Index assesses factors such as media independence, self-censorship, the legal framework and transparency based on a questionnaire filled out by experts.

'Chinese-style scenario'

Turkey, where President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been repeatedly criticized for cracking down on press freedom, rose three places to 154th but RSF said this was because of "other countries falling" rather than positive change. It said censorship of the media, especially online media, has been stepped up in Turkey and the country was "more authoritarian than ever." Russia, under President Vladimir Putin, in 149th place, is also persevering "efforts to control the Internet, using ever more elaborate methods", it said, citing a law that would allow the country to disconnect the Russian internet from the rest of the world. —AFP

News in brief

'Appalling' crime leaves 9 dead

BEIRUT: Nine people were found dead in a Lebanese town southeast of the capital Beirut on Tuesday, a security source told AFP, in what the prime minister called an "appalling crime". The bodies of six Syrians, two of whom were children, and three Lebanese including a woman, were discovered in a house and a nearby forested area near Baakline in the Chouf region, the source said. Marwan Hamadeh, a Baakline-born MP, said it was a "crime of honor" by a man suffering "psychological disorders", without giving further details. Prime Minister Hassan Diab called for a speedy manhunt. According to a preliminary police investigation most of the victims suffered gunshot wounds, while the woman had been stabbed, the source said. The source did not say whether the victims were related to the killer, or indicate a motive. —AFP

US immigration suspension

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump said Tuesday he was suspending immigration for green card seekers for 60 days, arguing the controversial move would help Americans find work again after coronavirus caused a surge in unemployment. Trump told reporters at the White House the suspension would come into force through an executive order that he would likely sign on Wednesday as he offered the first details about a vague announcement he made Monday night on Twitter. Addressing an issue key to his conservative base as the country is ravaged by the coronavirus pandemic, with more than 43,000 people dead in the US, Trump said his move would help Americans who have lost their jobs during the ongoing shutdown. "By pausing immigration, it will help put unemployed Americans first in line for jobs as America reopens," Trump said at his daily pandemic briefing. —AFP

Virus hits 34 ship crew

TOKYO: At least 34 crew members aboard a cruise ship docked in the Japanese city of Nagasaki have tested positive for coronavirus, local authorities said yesterday. The Costa Atlantica first arrived in Nagasaki in January to undergo repairs, with several hundred crew on board. Over the weekend, the ship's operator contacted local authorities seeking help to test suspected cases on board. An initial four tests carried out on the ship revealed a first infection on Monday, with additional testing among 57 crew finding a total of 34 cases yesterday. "Many infections have been confirmed on the ship," Nagasaki governor Hodo Nakamura told reporters yesterday. "We hope that they will be able to go home in full health as soon as possible. We are asking the national government for help." Nakamura said those infected and other crew members remain on the ship, adding that the ship's operator has told local officials that crew members are self-isolating. —AFP

Virus hits Quebec nursing homes

MONTREAL: Officials in Quebec, the Canadian province hit hardest by the coronavirus pandemic, revealed Tuesday that more than eight out of every 10 deaths there came at nursing homes. The staggering figure comes following a massive public outcry over the dire situation at the private Herron facility in a Montreal suburb, where 31 people died in just a few weeks after many of their caregivers fled the premises. The province has rushed thousands of doctors to care for the 4,000 nursing home patients who have contracted the virus. "Out of the 1,041 deaths we've seen up until now, 850 of them were at residences for the elderly," Quebec's premiere Francois Legault told reporters. "Many died after they were taken to hospital," he added, calling the situation in Quebec's elder care facilities "the great challenge" facing his government. —AFP