

## International

# UK reports lowest virus toll in weeks as Johnson returns

## Coronavirus leaves 20,732 dead in Britain

LONDON: Britain has reported its lowest daily rise in coronavirus deaths in nearly four weeks as officials confirmed Prime Minister Boris Johnson had returned to Downing Street after recovering from the virus. The number of people who have died rose by 413 to 20,732, officials said on Sunday, the lowest reported daily increase in April.

The last time the health department recorded a smaller increase was on March 31, when 381 deaths were registered. The latest figures were published just hours before Johnson returned. "I can confirm that the prime minister has returned to Downing Street," an official told AFP. Johnson resumes his duties yesterday after recovering at his country residence since his release from hospital on April 12.

And immediate concern will be deciding whether to relax strict social distancing rules. Despite the slowdown-which came at a weekend when the toll has often been lower-Environment Secretary George Eustice said on Sunday that lockdown rules should remain in place. "There are encouraging signs of progress," he said at a daily press briefing. "But before we consider it safe to adjust any of the current system distancing measures, we must be satisfied that we have met the

five tests set last week."

These included making sure the British health service (NHS) was able to cope, and a "sustained and consistent" fall in the daily death rate. The UK was initially placed into lockdown on March 23. This was extended on April 16 and a review is due on May 7. Eustice echoed statements made by Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab-who has been deputizing for Johnson-that the rules would "be with us for some time" and were the "new normal". There had been calls for the rules to be relaxed from within the ruling Conservative Party.

The new opposition Labor party leader Keir Starmer meanwhile wrote to Johnson on Sunday asking for details of a potential lifting of restrictions. He accused the government of mistakes at the beginning of the crisis, adding: "The government cannot fall short in its preparations for what happens when the time is right for lockdown

measures to be lifted." Sunday's figures also showed another 4,463 people had tested positive for the virus, bringing the total to almost 153,000.

### Influence row

Despite Sunday's lower death toll Britain remains one of the worst-hit countries in the world by the virus. The government has been under scrutiny, especially over shortages in protective equipment and a lack of widespread testing, particularly of frontline health and social care workers. Meanwhile, a row continues over the role played by Johnson's chief adviser Dominic Cummings, after it emerged he attended meetings of the main scientific group advising ministers on the coronavirus pandemic.

The government denied Cummings and another advisor were members of the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) - a body that is

“ There are encouraging signs of progress ”

## Faces from Africa's anti-virus frontlines

DAKAR: Across Africa, obscure or forgotten health and government officials have been propelled into the public eye because of their role in fighting coronavirus. Some are unsung veterans of previous efforts to stop epidemics, such as Ebola or AIDS. Others are from a younger generation, making a name for themselves on social media.

### Zweli Mkhize, South Africa

South Africa's indefatigable health minister, Zweli Mkhize, has an upbeat motto in a video message on coronavirus aired regularly on public television: "Stay calm, focused and courageous". The doctor-turned-politician is constantly on the move across the virus-ravaged country, meeting local health staff and officials, while driving home health advice on social media and in polished television interviews. Mkhize, 64, is also a veteran of South Africa's struggle against AIDS. When he was a provincial cadre of the ruling African National Congress party, he personally wrote to former President Thabo Mbeki-a HIV/AIDS-denialist-to urge him into action. The editor of South African weekly City Press has described him as "clever, able and smart".

### Yvonne Aki-Sawyer, Sierra Leone

The mayor of Sierra Leone's capital Freetown is determined to slow the spread of coronavirus in the

West African city, but she has her work cut out for her. Nearly half of the roughly one million inhabitants of the seaside capital have no access to running water, which is essential for hand-washing. Yvonne Aki-Sawyer, 52, is pushing to provide access to water urgently. "We need to fill those gaps as (a) government and fill them very quickly," she recently told French media.

A former finance professional with a master's degree from the London School of Economics, Aki-Sawyer is another of Africa's old epidemic warhorses. She was the director of planning for Sierra Leone's national Ebola response team, when the virus killed nearly 4,000 people in the country between 2014 and 2016, and was awarded an Order of the British Empire for her efforts. Known for her smily demeanor and her determination, Freetown's first female mayor also set a good example at the start of the coronavirus pandemic, by isolating herself for two weeks after returning from abroad.

### Jean-Jacques Muyembe, DRC

Jean-Jacques Muyembe is one of a small number of people who can claim to be mangaging two epidemics of global importance. A discrete and affable man who looks younger than his 78 years, the Congolese virologist's life has been intimately linked to the Democratic Republic of Congo's ten Ebola outbreaks.

In 1976, he was one of the first to research the then-unknown Ebola virus in the field-without protective gear. He went on to play a critical role in identifying the viral haemorrhagic fever, and in finding its treatment. Muyembe is now the DRC's

decades with the hard left Unidas Podemos party, another former foe of the Socialists, following delicate negotiations. Though strains loomed on issues from Catalan separatism to immigration and labor reforms, the coalition got off to a relatively smooth start, to the relief of investors in the European Union's (EU) fourth largest economy.

Then along came COVID-19. Spain has had one of the world's worst outbreaks, with more than 22,500 deaths. The crisis has shredded its economy, with hotels and beaches empty, crops unpicked in fields due to lack of foreign workers, and an 8% contraction forecast. While there has been solidarity around the lockdown in place since March 14, now that the infection peak has passed and attention is turning to easing restrictions and economic recovery, Sanchez is scrambling to find the broad support he needs.

For weeks, he has been calling for unity and reconstruction within both Europe and Spain - but he appears to have been more successful abroad, where Madrid this week helped push EU leaders into agreeing a 1 trillion euro emergency fund. "We see the pact in Europe for reconstruction moving forward. Perhaps it is time for it to move forward in Spain as well," said Foreign Minister Arancha Gonzalez Laya. But so far, among conservative opposition forces, only the 10 lawmakers of Ciudadanos party have said they will support his pact, while others parked the issue in a congressional committee. —Reuters

from the country's privacy watchdog.

Paris has identified 17 priorities for gradually bringing the country out of lockdown in a "controlled, progressive" manner from May 11. These include reopening schools, companies returning to work, getting public transport back to normal, supplying masks and sanitizer, testing policy and support for the elderly.

However, the plans, drawn up by the government's scientific advisors, have been questioned in some quarters, notably by schoolteacher unions who expressed doubt as to whether measures such as keeping classes strictly apart were feasible. A dozen ministers will on Monday consult with representatives of local authorities to discuss various options. France has been in lockdown since March 17 and the government faces a deli-

The world's nations spent a combined \$1.9 trillion (1.78 trillion euros) on their militaries in 2019, according to a report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). Compared to 2018, that represented an annual growth of 3.6 percent, the largest spending growth since 2010.

"Military spending has reached the highest point since the end of the Cold War," Nan Tian, a researcher at SIPRI, told AFP. Driving the increase are the world's largest spenders, headed by the US, which spent \$732 billion in 2019, a 5.3



DAKAR: Health workers disinfect themselves after taking swabs tests of patients inside a COVID-19 coronavirus ward that houses suspected cases in Pikine Hospital in Dakar. —AFP

coronavirus front man. His upstanding image suffered damage recently, however, when he stirred controversy at home by saying he was prepared to trial a vaccine developed abroad in the Central African state. He quickly backtracked. "I am Congolese myself, and I would never let Congolese be used as guinea pigs," he said.

### Moussa Seydi, Senegal

Moussa Seydi, 56, is an infectious-diseases specialist who is in charge of treating Senegal's coronavirus patients. He has drawn attention to himself for prescribing the anti-malarial hydroxychloroquine, which he suggests could be the reason for the West African country's high rate of coronavirus recovery. —AFP



PALMA: A father sits with his children at Can Pere Antoni Beach in Palma de Mallorca during a national lockdown to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 disease. —AFP

cate balancing act to revive the economy without triggering a resurgence in the epidemic.

### Sagging support

A Journal du Dimanche/Ifo opinion poll showed Sunday only 39 percent of people have confidence in the government's ability to deal effectively with the virus, seven points down on last week. The pandemic has killed 22,614 people in France since the start of March, with 369 new deaths recorded in the previous 24 hours, according to official figures released late Saturday, which saw a significant drop in hospital deaths. Under the government plans, travel within France would be permitted from May 11 - but travel abroad discouraged at least until the summer to minimize the risk of cross-border infection. —AFP

percent increase, alone accounting for 38 percent of global spending. 2019 marked the second year of growth in US military spending after seven years of decline.

For the first time, two Asian countries were among the top three, with China and India spending an estimated \$261 billion (up 5.1 percent) and \$71.1 billion (up 6.8 percent) respectively. While Chinese expenditure over the past 25 years has closely followed the country's rapid economic expansion, their investments also reflect their ambition of a "world class military". —AFP



LONDON: Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson gives a statement in Downing Street in central London yesterday after returning to work following more than three weeks off after being hospitalised with the COVID-19 illness. —AFP

supposed to be independent. Officials said the advisers attended SAGE meetings to "understand better" the scientific debates. A former Conservative frontbencher, David Davis, tweeted: "We should publish the membership of SAGE: remove any non-scientist members." —AFP

### News in brief

#### Syria intercepts 'Israeli' missiles

DAMASCUS: Syrian air defense intercepted several missiles fired during an "Israeli" air strike yesterday against targets near the capital Damascus, the official SANA news agency reported. It did not give details of the positions targeted shortly before dawn but said the military "shot down a number of missiles before they reached their targets". SANA described it as "Israeli aggression" carried out from Lebanese airspace. Since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011, Israel has carried out hundreds of strikes in the country, targeting government troops as well as allied Iranian forces and fighters from Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, enemies of the Jewish state. On April 20, SANA said Syrian air defenses had downed Israeli missiles near the ancient city of Palmyra. —AFP

#### Roads blocked in protest

BEIRUT: Demonstrators blocked roads through Lebanon late Sunday to protest the deteriorating economic situation, despite a lockdown and curfew imposed because of the coronavirus, according to the official news agency. Police quickly intervened to reopen the highways where the demonstrators burned tyres to block roads, the ANI national news agency said. In Zalqa sector, northeast of Beirut, six people were injured, Lebanese Red Cross official Rodney Eid said without providing further details. An AFP photographer saw protesters setting tyres ablaze on the highway north of the capital, in the suburbs of Dbaiyeh, before the army and police moved in. Protesters also mobilized in the main northern city of Tripoli, according to ANI. And south of Beirut, young people set tyres ablaze on the Damour highway, the agency said. —AFP

#### Troops disperse Muslims

MORONI: Security forces in the Comoros have used teargas against Muslims who had congregated in mosques in violation of coronavirus lockdown rules, witnesses and a security source said on Sunday. The incidents occurred in two locations on the Comoros island of Anjouan, according to a security source who asked not to be named. A witness said that "people were injured, most of them fled through the windows, one of them broke their foot", adding that "even this morning there was still a smell of gas in the area". President Azali Assoumani on Friday signed a decree strengthening anti-virus measures, which now include a nightly curfew. The Comoros-a predominantly Muslim Indian Ocean island group with around 40 percent of its population living in poverty according to the World Bank-is one of few countries without any officially registered coronavirus cases. —AFP

#### 'Black market' face masks

BOBIGNY: French police have seized 140,000 face masks intended for the black market in a record haul since the start of the coronavirus pandemic. It is the largest seizure since the French government banned the resale of protective masks to prioritise their distribution to health workers in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. Two individuals were arrested while they were unloading boxes in Saint-Denis, just north of Paris, a police source said on Sunday. One of them said he was a business owner and had bought the masks, including 5,000 high protection FFP2 masks, in the Netherlands for a total of 80,000 euros (\$87,000). The masks were to be sold to construction workers for a large profit, according to police. In March, 32,500 masks from China were seized from a warehouse near Paris and 28,800 masks were discovered in a shop in a district of Chinese wholesalers, also in the Paris region. —AFP

## Honeymoon over, Spain's coalition tested by COVID

MADRID: Spain's Socialist-led government marked its first 100 days in power by passing an emergency decree with the help of its eternal adversary the conservative People's Party. But that rare show of unity merely masked deeper problems as the coronavirus crisis has cut the coalition's honeymoon and triggered aggressive opposition to Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez's national reconstruction masterplan.

"Do you intend to stand like Nero, playing the fiddle while Rome burns?" People's Party (PP) leader Pablo Casado taunted Sanchez, even after supporting the state of emergency extension. "Don't give up, Mr. Sanchez. Before talking about reconstruction, we must avoid destruction," he added, opposing Sanchez's talk of a national "pact" for economic recovery similar to one in the late 1970s after dictator Francisco Franco.

After four inconclusive elections in four years, Sanchez in January formed Spain's first coalition government in

## French PM presents strategy on ending COVID-19 lockdown

PARIS: French Prime Minister Edouard Philippe will today present the national strategy for emerging from the coronavirus lockdown, his office said. His announcement at the National Assembly will be followed by a debate and a vote. An app for tracing contacts of confirmed cases is also due to be unveiled today and Sunday received approval, albeit conditional,

## Military expenditure saw biggest increase in a decade in 2019

STOCKHOLM: Global military expenditure saw its biggest uptick in a decade in 2019, researchers said yesterday, marking the first year two Asian countries were among the top three spenders.