

International

Europe fears 2nd wave; Trump takes heat for 'misinformation'

Worldwide COVID death toll crosses 700,000

WASHINGTON: While Europe tightened virus restrictions to face the threat of a second wave of COVID-19, US President Donald Trump on Wednesday found himself in the crosshairs of Facebook and Twitter because of a video in which he claims children are "almost immune" to the new coronavirus. The worldwide death toll crossed 700,000 as the two US social media giants took action against Trump for spreading what they called "misinformation" about the virus.

Several European countries and cities reimposed tighter restrictions, including a "wake-up week" in Greece and new face mask and quarantine rules elsewhere. The US tallied another 1,262 deaths and 53,158 cases Wednesday, marking 157,930 total deaths and more than 4.8 million cases - making it by far the worst-hit country in the world. A total of 703,640 deaths have been recorded so far around the world, according to an AFP tally compiled from official sources as of 0300 GMT yesterday. Europe remains the hardest-hit region with 211,764 fatalities, but the number of deaths is rising fast in Latin America, with 208,329 deaths recorded.

Announcing the re-introduction of restrictions in Greece, government spokesman Stelios Petsas told Mega TV: "We are trying to awaken people with messages and daily announcements on additional measures," citing travel, social gatherings

and public transport as major spreading concerns. Restrictions reimposed on the northeast Scottish city of Aberdeen included the closure of all indoor and outdoor hospitality venues starting late Wednesday as First Minister Nicola Sturgeon referred to what could become a "significant outbreak."

Toulouse in southwest France made face masks compulsory, with more French cities expected to follow suit. And Germany included Belgium's Antwerp province on its list of regions requiring arriving travelers to quarantine for 14 days unless they can show a negative virus test. In Belgium, one of the country's biggest meat processing plants, Westvlees, sent 225 staff home to quarantine after a cluster of coronavirus cases was discovered.

Switzerland added mainland Spain to a quarantine list of 46 countries as well as Singapore and Romania. In the Netherlands, similar mask-wearing measures came into force in Rotterdam and in some busy neighborhoods of Amsterdam, including its famous red-light district.

In an extraordinary move late Wednesday, Facebook removed a video clip about the virus from Trump's account. It was the first time the social network has taken down one of the president's posts for violating its content rules - for "claims that a group of people is immune from COVID-19 which is a violation of our policies around harmful



DALLAS: The caskets holding the bodies of Lola M Simmons-Jones and her daughter, Lashaye Antoinette Allen, who both died of coronavirus, are placed next to one another before burial at Lincoln Memorial Cemetery in Dallas, Texas. — AFP

COVID misinformation," a Facebook spokesperson told AFP. Twitter meanwhile said it had blocked Trump's official campaign account, also for a "misinformation" violation over a tweet containing the same video, in which Trump made the case for reopening US schools starting in September.

Soon thereafter, the @TeamTrump account was

active, suggesting the contested video had been taken down. Also in the United States, New York mayor Bill de Blasio, announcing new checkpoints at access roads into the city, said: "We're not going to let our hard work slip away and will continue to do everything we can to keep New Yorkers safe and healthy."—AFP

Brazil adrift; virus toll nears 100,000

SAO PAULO: Five months after confirming its first case of the new coronavirus, Brazil is fast approaching the bleak milestone of 100,000 deaths from COVID-19, a tragedy experts blame on the country's lack of coherent response. It will be just the second country to cross that grim threshold, after the United States, where the death toll is now over 150,000.

"It's a tragedy, one of the worst Brazil has ever seen," said sociologist Celso Rocha de Barros, as the number of infections in the sprawling South American country approached three million—also the second-highest in the world, after the US. Brazil confirmed its first case of the new coronavirus on February 26: a Sao Paulo businessman returning from a trip to Italy.

The country of 212 million people registered its first death on March 16. "At that point, Brazil was more or less getting organized to deal with the pandemic," said Paulo Lotufo, an epidemiologist at the University of Sao Paulo. But then, po-

litical chaos ensued. Far-right President Jair Bolsonaro condemned the "hysteria" around the virus and railed against decisions by state and local authorities to impose stay-at-home measures to contain it, arguing the economic damage would be worse than the disease.

Meanwhile, the country's infection curve exploded. Chilling images emerged from Sao Paulo of six-minute speed burials by grave-diggers clad head-to-toe in protective gear and mass plots excavated by bulldozers in the Amazon city of Manaus. The curve has plateaued in recent weeks, but at a high level: Brazil has registered an average of around 1,000 deaths per day for more than a month. The toll stood at 2.9 million infections and 97,256 deaths late Wednesday. The country appeared to be on track to record its 100,000th death at the weekend.

'Face up to it'

A fervent advocate of the drug hydroxychloroquine against COVID-19 - despite a lack of evidence for its effec-

tiveness—Bolsonaro churned through two health ministers in less than a month, after falling out with them over the response to the pandemic. The post is now held on an interim basis by an army general with no prior medical experience.

The president meanwhile has continued to downplay the virus, even after catching it himself last month. He was forced into quarantine for three weeks. "Nearly everyone here is going to catch it eventually. What are you afraid of? Face up to it," he said after emerging from isolation.

The message from the Bolsonaro government has been "the exact opposite" of what it should have been, said Barros. "Lockdown is difficult. It has to be coordinated by a leader with political credibility," he told AFP. "You have to explain to people that it's hard, but necessary to avoid a massacre." Instead, most Brazilian states started exiting lockdown in June, under pressure from Bolsonaro and despite warnings from experts that it was too soon.—AFP

Fears grow in Turkey as daily coronavirus cases top 1,000

ANKARA: Turkey has expressed concern over the rising number of coronavirus cases as the daily infection toll exceeded 1,000 for the second day in a row on Wednesday. Ankara has eased most of the restrictions that were in place since the first case was recorded in March, rising to a peak of more than 5,000 daily infections in April. But after nearly a month of daily cases numbering around 900, Turkish Health Minister Fahrettin Koca said 1,178 infections were recorded in the past 24 hours. Koca urged citizens on Wednesday to take precautions to avoid further increases.

"We're CONCERNED about the increase in the number of cases, previously limited to some provinces, spreading in the coming days throughout the country," he also said on Monday, which saw 995 confirmed cases. The next day Turkey recorded 1,083 infections. The total number of deaths now stands at 5,784 and infections at 236,112.

Koca said at the weekend that the "first wave reached the beaches" as Turks and foreign tourists take to the country's famous turquoise coast, especially during the Muslim Eid al-Adha holiday last week. The outbreak appeared to have worsened in the capital Ankara, the second most populous city in Turkey after Istanbul. The Ankara Medical Chamber (ATO) on Tuesday said "pandemic hospitals and their intensive care units in Ankara were 100 percent full" and unable to take in new COVID-19 patients. — AFP