

International

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Curfews imposed in several US cities

Iran berates US over police killing, slams racism

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LIMA: Relatives bury the coffin of a suspected COVID-19 victim at the Nueva Esperanza cemetery, one of the largest in Latin America, in the southern outskirts of Lima. — AFP

World virus cases top 6 million

Leaders disagree on pandemic response

BRASILIA: The number of coronavirus cases worldwide topped six million yesterday, with Brazil registering another record surge in daily infections as divisions deepened on how to deal with the pandemic. Latin American countries are bracing for difficult weeks ahead as the disease spreads rapidly across the region, even as much of the world exits lockdowns that have wrecked economies and stripped millions of their jobs.

In Brazil—the epicenter of South America's outbreak with nearly 500,000 confirmed cases, lagging only behind the United States—disagreement among leaders over lockdown measures has hampered efforts to slow the virus as the number of fatalities in the country nears 30,000.

President Jair Bolsonaro, who fears the economic fallout from stay-at-home measures will be worse than the virus, has berated governors and mayors for imposing what he calls “the tyranny of total quarantine”. As the global death toll from the pandemic surpassed 368,000, US President Donald Trump's decision to permanently cut funding to the World Health Organization has been broadly criticized.

The number of confirmed cases worldwide is more than six million, according to an AFP tally. “Now is the time for enhanced cooperation and common solutions,” the European Union said in a statement, adding: “Actions that weaken international results must be avoided.” Trump initially suspended funding to the WHO last month, accusing it of not doing enough to curb the early

spread of the virus and being too lenient with China, where COVID-19 emerged late last year.

On Friday he moved to make that decision permanent in a major blow to the agency. The US is the WHO's biggest contributor, supplying \$400 million last year. German Health Minister Jens Spahn said the “disappointing” decision was a setback for global health, while Chancellor Angela Merkel declined to attend an in-person G7 summit that Trump had suggested he would host. Richard Horton, editor of *The Lancet* medical journal, said it was “madness and terrifying both at the same time”.

Lockdowns ease

As the virus progresses at different speeds around the globe, there has been pressure in many countries to lift crippling lockdowns, despite experts' warnings of a possible second wave of infections. In Britain, which is set to begin lifting its lockdown on Monday, senior advisors to the government warned that it was moving too quickly. “COVID-19 spreading too fast to lift lockdown in England,” tweeted Jeremy Farrar, a member of the government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies. India said Saturday it would begin relaxing the world's biggest lockdown in stages from early June, even

as it marked another record daily rise in infections.

Iran meanwhile announced that collective prayers would resume in mosques, despite infections ticking back upwards in the Middle East's hardest-hit country. Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa mosque compound—the third-holiest site in Islam after Makkah and Medina in Saudi Arabia—reopened to worshippers yesterday. With infection numbers falling in many of Europe's most affected countries, the push to restart economies was gaining steam.

Italy's Leaning Tower of Pisa reopened on Saturday, while in Paris, parks and the famed Galleries Lafayette department store flung open their doors. In Austria, hotels and cinemas were allowed to take in customers, provided they wear masks. “It is very important that things return to normal,” film buff Rotraud Turanitz said at Vienna's historic Admiral Kino cinema on trendy Burggasse. Across the Atlantic, the US capital Washington resumed outdoor dining, while on the West Coast, restaurants and hair salons in Los Angeles reopened.

New York City, the worst-hit American city with about 21,500 coronavirus deaths, is on track to begin reopening the week of June 8. The overall US death toll has topped 103,000 out of more than 1.7 million cases

of the virus. Global sport has also started to rev back into action, with Austria announcing it will host Formula One's delayed season-opener on July 5, and the NBA eyeing a July 31 return. Britain approved the return of domestic competitive sport on June 1 - with no fans present—while South Africa has given a provisional green light for training to resume.

Economies shattered

But the economic damage from weeks of lockdowns continues to pile up, with Chile and Peru securing credit lines worth billions from the IMF. India's economy grew at its slowest pace in two decades in the first quarter, while Canada, Brazil, France and Italy also saw their GDP figures shrink ahead of an expected worldwide recession. As the virus hits the world's poor particularly hard, Pope Francis called for a “more just and equitable society” in the post-coronavirus world and for people to act to “end the pandemic of poverty”.

Even the animal world has not been left untouched by the pandemic. Gibraltar has banned tourists from touching the British enclave's famous Barbary macaques over fears they could spread coronavirus. Singapore's beloved otters meanwhile have been popping up in unexpected places during the city-state's lockdown, but their increasingly daring antics have angered some and even sparked calls for a cull. “I simply don't understand anyone who could not like them. They are really cute,” said 35-year-old Singaporean Pam Wong. — AFP

With fact-checks, Twitter takes on a new kind of task

WASHINGTON: In addition to disputing misleading claims made by US President Donald Trump about mail-in ballots this week, Twitter has added fact-checking labels to thousands of other tweets since introducing the alerts earlier this month, mostly on posts about the coronavirus. The company does not expect to need additional staff for the undertaking, Twitter spokeswoman Liz Kelley said on Saturday.

Nor is it partnering with independent fact-checking organizations, as Facebook and Google have, to outsource the debunking of viral posts flagged by users. Social media platforms have been under fierce scrutiny over how they police rapidly spreading false information and other types of abusive content since Russia exploited the networks to interfere in the 2016 US presidential election.

Fact-checking groups said they welcomed Twitter's new approach, which adds a “get the facts” tag linking to more information, but said they hoped the company would more clearly lay out its methodology and reasoning. On Friday, Chief Executive Jack Dorsey acknowledged the criticism, saying he agreed fact-checking “should be open source and thus verifiable by everyone.” In a separate tweet, Dorsey said more transparency from the company was “critical.”

The company's move to label Trump's claims about mail-in ballots separates it from larger competitors such as Facebook, which declares its neutrality by leaving fact-check decisions to third-party partners and exempts politicians' posts from review. “To a degree, fact-checking is subjective. It's subjective in what you pick to check, and it's subjective in how you rate something,” said Aaron Sharockman, executive director of US fact-checking site PolitiFact, who said Twitter's process was opaque.

Twitter telegraphed in May that its new policy of adding fact-checking labels to disputed or misleading coronavirus information would be expanded to other topics. It said this week - after tagging Trump's tweets - that it was now labeling misleading content related to election integrity. Twitter's Kelley said the team is continuing to expand the effort to include other topics, prioritizing claims that could cause people immediate harm.

A Twitter spokesman said the company's Trust and Safety division is tasked with the “leg-work” on such labels, but declined to give the team's size. This week, Twitter defended one of these employees after he was blasted as politically biased by Trump and his supporters over 2017 tweets. Twitter also drew Trump's ire for putting a warning over his tweet about protests in Minnesota over the police killing of a black man for “glorifying violence,” an enactment of a 2019 policy that was long-awaited by the site's critics.

In the tweet, Trump warned the mostly African-American protesters that “when the looting starts, the shooting starts,” a phrase used during the civil rights era to justify police vio-



Brazil registers another record surge

lence against demonstrators. Facebook did not take action on the same post. The Twitter spokesman said decisions on the labels are made by a team of executives, including Sean Edgett, Twitter's general counsel, and Del Harvey, the vice president of Trust and Safety. Chief Executive Officer Jack Dorsey is informed before actions are taken. The company's curation team aggregates tweets on the disputed claims and writes a summary for a landing page. The team, which includes former journalists, normally pulls together content in categories including Trending, News, Entertainment, Sports and Fun. Twitter, whose executives at one time referred to it as “the free speech wing of the free speech party,” has been tightening content policies for several years after recognizing that abuses had grown rampant. — Reuters



VAASA: The Twitter page of US President Donald Trump's is displayed on a mobile phone in Vaasa, Finland. — AFP

Divert weapons funding to research to prevent pandemic, pope says

VATICAN CITY: Pope Francis on Saturday urged politicians to divert funds spent on weapons to research to prevent another pandemic, as he led the largest gathering in the Vatican in nearly three months. Francis presided at an outdoor prayer service with about 130 people, including many directly affected by the pandemic.

They prayed the rosary in the Vatican gardens as tens of thousands of people in about 50 Catholic shrines around the world joined in. A large screen in the gardens showed video links with about 25 locations. Among those who prayed were Italian doctors, nurses, and ambulance drivers, as well as people who had recovered from coronavirus or lost family members. More than 33,000 have died in Italy. Most wore masks except for when they led prayers at the microphone. Francis, 83, sat several metres away from most people during most of the service and did not wear a mask.

In his closing prayer, Francis said national leaders should take a far-

sighted attitude, helping the most needy now and putting in place long-term economic and social solutions. He prayed that the Madonna would “touch (leaders') consciences so that enormous sums spent to possess more armaments and to perfect them be instead destined to the promotion of sufficient research to prevent such catastrophes in the future”. Earlier this month, Francis called for international scientific cooperation to develop a vaccine and said any successful one should be shared globally.

For nearly three months, Francis has led televised Masses, general audiences and Sunday addresses from inside the Vatican with no public. St Peter's Basilica and St Peter's Square were fully reopened on May 18 as Italy entered the second phase of easing restrictions. Yesterday, Francis said a Mass with only about 50 people inside the basilica but later delivered his Sunday message from his window overlooking the square for the first time since early March. — Reuters