

International

Record deaths in Brazil and Mexico spur defense efforts

South and Central America become the new hotspots

RIO DE JANEIRO: Brazil and Mexico reported record daily coronavirus death tolls as governments in Latin America battled to fortify defenses against the accelerating pandemic with fresh lockdown orders and curfews. European nations are emerging from months of devastation with some borders re-opening, but South and Central America have become the new hotspots in a crisis that has claimed at least 385,000 lives worldwide. Mexico on Wednesday announced more than 1,000 coronavirus deaths in a day for the first time, while Brazil reported a record 1,349 daily deaths.

Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro has staunchly opposed lockdowns but many local authorities have defied him and, with the crisis deepening, a vast section of Bahia state was on Wednesday placed under curfew. There was more cause for concern in Chile, where the government said it was extending a three-week shutdown of the capital Santiago after a new record for daily deaths. And in more evidence of the scale of the crisis in Latin America, the journalists' union in Peru said at least 20 reporters had died from the coronavirus.

The outbreak in Peru has been so intense that oxygen tanks needed in hospitals have become scarce, with many lining up to buy them for their loved ones. "We haven't found oxygen yet," said Lady Savalla in the capital Lima. "I'm worried about my mom more than anything else, because

she's going to need a lot of oxygen and the hospital doesn't have enough."

Experts have warned that travel restrictions will be needed around the world in some form until a vaccine is found — and efforts to develop one are gathering pace. Britain is set to host a major meeting on Thursday, with more than 50 countries as well as powerful individuals such as Bill Gates taking part, to raise money for Gavi, the global vaccine alliance. Gavi and its partners will also launch a financing drive to purchase potential COVID-19 vaccines, scale-up their production and support delivery to developing nations.

Tests on one potential vaccine, being developed by Oxford University, will begin on 2,000 health services volunteers in Brazil next week. But months of lockdowns that left half of humanity under some form of confinement have battered the global economy, and there is desperation in many countries to reopen and revive businesses. Italy opened its borders to European travelers on Wednesday, hoping tourism will revive its recession-hit economy three months after its shutdown, though a full recovery seemed a long way off. "I don't think we'll see any foreign tourists really until the end of August or even September," said Mimmo Burgio, a cafe owner near Rome's Colosseum. "Who's going to come?"

The United States remains the hardest-hit na-



MANAUS: Aerial view of the Nossa Senhora Aparecida cemetery where COVID-19 victims are buried daily, in the neighbourhood of Taruma, in Manaus, Brazil during the novel coronavirus pandemic. — AFP

tion in the world, with 1.85 million infections and more than 107,000 deaths, and there are fears that the ongoing wave of protests in the country over racism and police brutality could fuel the spread of the virus. Massive rallies have been held around America despite the risk of COVID-19 and restrictions on public gatherings. Many have said that while they were aware of the risk of infection, the issue of police brutality and racism was so

widespread and longstanding that they had to come out. Cav Manning, a 52-year-old emcee from New York, was among the tens of thousands across America willing to risk infection as he joined a protest in Brooklyn earlier this week. "What we saw is so disturbing that we've got to be out here right now," he told AFP. "Despite COVID, despite the fact that you might get infected." — AFP

'Recycles' help shield Mexico health workers from COVID stigma

MEXICO CITY: Daniela Chavez, a doctor, took up cycling to work after she felt discriminated against by a taxi driver. Her bicycle was a gift from activists who have been rounding up bicycles - dubbed by one organization as "recycles" - to donate to healthcare workers in Mexico City, in a bid to protect them from being stigmatized for looking after patients with COVID-19. Chavez said that as soon as she climbed inside the cab after a hard day in a public hospital, the driver asked if she was a doctor and where she worked.

Fearful she would suffer an aggressive response if she told him, as some colleagues have, the 26-year-old decided to get out instead. "I don't know if it's psychosis! We know we're people at risk, we always have been, but now that people discriminate against us for doing a dignified profession it's unprecedented," she told AFP. As coronavirus spread in Mexico, health care workers faced physical aggression on top of suspicion by people who viewed them as sources of infection. But in April, two cycling organizations came to their help, launching an initiative on social media inviting people to donate unused bicycles or spare parts to be given to healthcare workers. Simultaneously, Bicitekas and Alcaaldia de la Bicicleta invited health care workers to apply online to receive a bicycle.

At their workshop in the central neighborhood of La Escandon, between pedals, wheels and saddles, a group of activists spend 20 hours a

week repairing and assembling bicycles. The initiative is also aimed at reducing the risk of doctors and nurses infecting people while using public transport in the city of more than 15 million. "At the start of this outbreak we asked ourselves what we could do to support healthcare personnel who were being discriminated against on their journeys, and unfortunately, attacked due to their profession," said Agustin Martinez, the founder of Bicitekas. The organization has received 240 requests for a "recycle", as its bikes are called. So far they have delivered around 50.

For Diana Garduno, a 30-year-old nurse, it was a welcome boon as her bike was stolen in a burglary. She says she's been afraid since one of her colleagues was doused with a hot drink while walking in the street. "It's depressing how we give everything for a patient to be well and once we're outside we suffer this type of aggression," said Garduno. Loic Jaeger, the Doctors Without Borders (MSF) director for Mexico and Central America, told AFP that these attacks were taking place in a context of "the normalization of violence" that spills over from organized crime. "If we had more knowledge, there wouldn't be these kind of actions against healthcare workers," added Diego Villafuerte, 23, an intern in a private clinic who has received a bike.

'A healthy distance'

On Monday, Mexico began the reopening of "essential" sectors of its industry, including mining, aviation, construction and the manufacture of transport equipment, following more than two months of lockdown. The country of 127 million people has recorded more than 10,600 deaths and almost 100,000 coronavirus cases. Under the easing of virus restrictions, Mexico City has also allowed the sale of bicycles, the mode of transport celebrated internationally on Wednesday in an annual event inaugurated by the United Nations in 2018. The Mobility Secretariat is due to build 54 kilometers (34 miles) of cycle lanes to help give some of the five million people who used the metro every day before lockdown another option. —AFP

HCQ ineffective at preventing the COVID-19: Trial

WASHINGTON: Taking hydroxychloroquine (HCQ) shortly after being exposed to COVID-19 does not help prevent infection in a statistically meaningful way, scientists reported Wednesday following a clinical trial. The medicine has been touted by US President Donald Trump, who has said he used it as a prophylaxis against the novel coronavirus. But an experiment involving 821 people across the United States and Canada showed it did not work significantly better than a placebo for this purpose. The study was led by a team at the University of Minnesota, and their paper was published in the New England Journal of Medicine. Researchers enrolled adults who had come into contact with someone who had a confirmed case of COVID-19 for more than 10 minutes at a distance of six feet (about two meters) or less.

The majority of them - 719 - were deemed to have had "high-risk" exposure because they wore neither a face mask nor an eye shield at the time, while the rest were "moderate-risk" because they covered their face but did not have goggles. All participants were randomly assigned to receive either hydroxychloroquine - which is certified for use against malaria, rheumatoid arthritis and lupus - or a placebo, within four days. The researchers then looked at how many patients went on to develop COVID-19 over the next two weeks, which was confirmed either by a laboratory test or by clinical signs. —AFP