

International

Uncertainty as Spain puts virus death toll 'on hold'

PM accused of hiding the real number of fatalities

MADRID: For days now, Spain's daily coronavirus death toll has been on hold, generating widespread uncertainty about the real state of the epidemic that has claimed more than 27,000 lives. The health ministry's emergencies coordinator Fernando Simon, who for months has given a daily briefing on the pandemic's evolution, acknowledged the "astonishment" and "confusion" generated by the figures.

On May 25, the ministry changed its method of collecting data on confirmed cases and fatalities, initially giving a daily death toll of between 50 and 100. But the figure then fell to fewer than five per day and on some days there were no deaths at all. Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez even told parliament there had been "no deaths" for several days, prompting a backlash from the right and the far-right who have since accused him of hiding the real number of fatalities. "(The) biggest danger is communicating this idea that the epidemic is over because the virus is still present in our country although at much lower levels," warned Salvador Macip, an expert in health sciences at Catalonia's Open University.

Stuck at 27,136

Simon has said the new system was set up to facilitate the rapid detection and isolation of any new outbreak and that the regions must provide a detailed breakdown of cases, rather than lumping all figures together. But last week he acknowledged that the overall number of deaths had remained "frozen" as a result of discrepancies in the figures, which he put down to delays in submitting data in certain regional areas. Since June 7, the number of dead has stuck at 27,136 while the regional authorities "review the information on deaths... (until) they can give a

precise death date which will give a clearer sequence," Simon said.

But some regions have hit back, insisting they have submitted all the required data yet saying it wasn't reflected in the overall balance. Such was the case with Andalusia whose health minister Jesus Aguirre recently lashed out at the central government's "total lack of respect for the dead" in publishing lower figures than those submitted by the southern region itself. One problem with the new system is that it puts "excessive emphasis on reporting the previous day's figures" because if the data arrive after the deadline,



Epidemic claims over 27,000 lives

they're not added to the daily total, explained Kiko Llaneras, a data analyst with El Pais newspaper. It has turned into "a source of huge disinformation" and in terms of communication it has "tainted the entire debate", he said.

'Not communicating clearly'

The situation became even more chaotic this week after the National Statistics Institute (INE) and the Carlos III Health Institute published figures showing



SAN SEBASTIAN: Two people (left) wear a face mask for the hearing-impaired in the Spanish Basque city of San Sebastian. Today, more than 70 percent of Spain's 47 million population will be in the final stage of the phased rollback that should finish by June 21 in a country badly hit by the epidemic that has killed more than 27,000 people. — AFP

that Spain's death toll has been between 43,000 and 44,000 higher than it has been on average in recent years. And this "excess mortality" has further inflamed the opposition who point to it as proof the government is playing down the death toll. But the government has rejected such claims, saying such figures include those who died of other causes or had COVID symptoms and never had a PCR test.

Such testing kits, which were very scarce at the start of the outbreak, have since become essential for confirming a new case and adding it to the overall fig-

ures. "It is normal that the death toll does not coincide with the excess mortality figures," explained Idefonso Hernandez, spokesman for the Spanish Society of Public Health, saying similar situations occur during flu season and heatwaves. "Is the government hiding deaths under the carpet? No it's not. Is the government communicating clearly? No, it's not doing that either," he complained. "One of the fundamental issues is that the management of information and communicating figures in the epidemic has not been clear enough," agreed Llaneras. — AFP

Indonesian police battle wave of 'body snatching' by grieving relatives

MAKASSAR: Indonesian hospitals are beefing up security at their morgues after a spate of body-snatchings by relatives seeking traditional burials for family members who died of COVID-19, police said Friday. Under new rules in the sprawling archipelago, COVID-19 victims must be wrapped in plastic and buried quickly to prevent the virus spreading, meaning grieving relatives are unable to follow Muslim funeral practices, which include washing the dead from head to toe.

Families in the Muslim-majority nation have also been urged not to linger at cemeteries, robbing them of the chance to perform prayers for loved ones. Large groups of distraught relatives descended on several hospitals in Makassar on Sulawesi island this week, with some managing to forcefully take away bodies set to be buried under the virus protocols, according to authorities. At least 33 people were arrested, said local police spokesman Ibrahim Tompo, who added they faced up to seven years in prison for violating health quarantine regulations. In response, Makassar authorities have deployed more

personnel to guard local hospitals, Tompo said.

Rumors that some victims of the slated for a quick burial had died of

unrelated illnesses had exacerbated the situation, Tompo added. "This angered the families and locals so they decided to forcefully take the bodies home." In Surabaya, Indonesia's second biggest city, authorities said Friday that they had arrested four people after relatives grabbed the body of a suspected virus victim from a local hospital. Also this week, dozens of people snatched the corpse of a man who died at hospital

in Bekasi, a city that borders the capital Jakarta, police said. Citing the interrogation of one suspect, police said the man took to snatching his relative because he had died before test results were available. They later confirmed he had the virus. Officially, Indonesia has more than 35,000 cases of COVID-19 and 2,000 deaths. But with low testing rates, the real toll is widely believed to be much higher. — AFP



MAKASSAR: A villager stands next to a banner readings their rejection to the rapid test for their community members amid concern of the COVID-19 coronavirus, in Makassar, South Sulawesi. Dozens of Indonesians have been arrested for snatching COVID-19 victims from hospitals in a bid to bury them according to local customs in the Muslim majority nation. — AFP

Nepal's parliament vote steps up border friction with India

KATHMANDU: Nepal's lower house of parliament on Saturday approved a new national emblem with a controversial political map that includes strategic territories disputed with its giant neighbour India. With relations between the two strained by their frontier squabble, India quickly hit back saying the action was "not tenable". The two have been wrangling since India last month opened a new 80-kilometre (50-mile) road in Uttarakhand state leading up to the disputed Lipu Lekh pass.

Nepal condemned the move and its cabinet decided to publish a new political map that includes Lipu Lekh and contested zones in Kalapani and Limpiyadhura. An amendment bill for a revised national emblem to include the new map was passed by the House of Representatives on Saturday. Speaker Agni Prasad Sapkota said there were no votes against. The amendment will have to be endorsed by the National Assembly and the president before it is implemented. The neighbors are wrangling over a region of more than 300 square kilometers (115 square miles) where the Nepali and Indian borders touch China. Nepal claims the Lipu Lekh under an 1816 treaty that sets the boundary with India along the Kali River. Disputes have arisen because neither side can agree its source.

Nepal claims the adjoining Kalapani region even though Indian troops have been deployed there since India and China fought a border war in 1962. Nepal has since deployed security forces close to Kalapani. Nepal and India have agreed



KATHMANDU: Protesters hold a banner with a new map during a demonstration against the government's handling of the fight against the COVID-19 coronavirus, in Kathmandu. — AFP

to hold talks on the dispute but Kathmandu says its neighbor will not set a date. "We are available for talks," Minister for Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs Shiva Maya Tumbahangphe told parliament. Following Saturday's vote, India's foreign ministry spokesman Anurag Srivastava said: "The artificial enlargement of claims is not based

on historical fact or evidence and is not tenable. "It is also violative of our current understanding to hold talks." Nepal reacted angrily last month after Indian army chief General M.M. Naravane commented that Nepal's reaction might have been "at the behest of someone else", hinting at China's involvement. — AFP

Militants kill 20 soldiers, 40 civilians in northeast Nigeria attacks

MAIDUGURI: Islamic militants killed at least 20 soldiers and more than 40 civilians and injured hundreds in twin attacks in northeast Nigeria's Borno state on Saturday, residents and a civilian task force fighter said. The attacks, in the Monguno and Nganzai local government areas, came just days after militants killed at least 69 people in a raid on a village in a third area, Gubio. Two humanitarian workers and three residents told Reuters that militants armed with heavy weaponry including rocket launchers arrived in Monguno, a hub for international non-governmental organizations, at roughly 11 a.m. local time. They overran government forces, taking some casualties but killing at least 20 soldiers and roaming the area for three hours.

The sources said hundreds of civilians were injured in the crossfire, overwhelming the local hospital and forcing some of the injured to lay outside the facility awaiting help. The sources said the militants also set fire to the local police station and burned down the United Nations' humanitarian hub in the area, although a UN spokesperson said the facility sustained only light damage. Fighters distributed letters to residents, in the local Hausa language, warning them not to work with the military, white Christian westerners or other "non-believers".

Militants also entered Nganzai at about the same time on Saturday, according to two residents and one Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) fighter. They arrived on motorcycles and in pickup trucks and killed more than 40 residents, the sources said. A military spokesman did not answer calls for comment on the attacks. UN officials could not immediately be reached for comment. Boko Haram and its offshoot, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), have killed thousands and displaced millions in northeastern Nigeria. ISWAP claimed the two Saturday attacks, and the Gubio attack. — Reuters

Chile's minister resigns as pandemic hits hard

SANTIAGO: Chile's health minister resigned Saturday amid controversy over the country's official coronavirus death toll, as the pandemic hits the nation hard despite quarantine measures in the capital for more than a month. The departure of Jaime Manalich was announced by President Sebastian Pinera. The government has said publicly that the health crisis has claimed more than 3,000 lives since the first case emerged in Chile on March 3. A report Saturday, however, revealed that Chile had informed the World Health Organization (WHO) that the death toll was actually more than 5,000. The report came from an investigative journalism organization called CIPER which obtained a copy of the health ministry documents sent to the WHO.

Manalich had faced mounting criticism over the way the health ministry tallies COVID-19 deaths. Deputy Health Minister Paula Daza explained the difference in the numbers. She said the higher figure presented to WHO includes both confirmed and suspected COVID-19 deaths, while the government's daily report reflects only those cases confirmed by a test based on a nasal swab. On Friday, Chile reported a record for new infections and deaths over a 24-hour period — 6,754 and 222, respectively. "The situation in our country continues to rise, above all in the metropolitan region," health ministry official Arturo Zuniga said Friday.

Infections have risen steadily in Chile even though it began taking emergency measures in February - including widespread testing and the closure of borders and schools - making it one of the first Latin American countries to do so. The capital Santiago and its seven million people were placed on lockdown more than a month ago; they were joined on Friday by the cities of Valparaiso and Vina del Mar. Nearly half of Chile's population of 18 million is now under strict confinement. The country initially had imposed selective quarantines on areas with high incidence of the coronavirus. But many poorer Chileans continued going to work - out of economic necessity - and a sharp resurgence in mid-May forced the government to order a strict lockdown. — AFP