



Trump ditches hopes of quick virus bounce-back

## Mafia primed to feast on Italy's virus devastation



WUHAN: Staff members spray disinfectant at a shopping mall as it prepares to reopen to the public after closing due to the COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan in China's central Hubei province. — AFP

# China's Hubei cremates coronavirus dead

## 'No farewells, no ceremonies'

**JINGZHOU:** Ten unclaimed urns sit in the crematorium in Jingzhou, a city in central China's Hubei province hard-hit by coronavirus. Not only are funerals banned across China, in places like Jingzhou bereaved relatives who are stuck in their homes must wait even to retrieve the remains of their loved ones. The ashes of the dead "are under our care for now because their family members are in quarantine, or they're away and can't come back yet," said the director of the Jingzhou crematorium, who gave only his surname, Sheng, as he was not permitted to speak to the media.

"No farewells, no ceremonies are allowed," Sheng told Reuters matter-of-factly in his office in the bare, off-white building. The coronavirus has infected more than half a million people and killed some 25,000 in more than 200 countries. In China, where it began, the virus has upended not only daily life but also how the dead are given a send-off, due to its highly contagious nature.

Whatever the cause of death, China's bereaved families have not been able to hold funerals since Feb. 1, even as the nation's outbreak eases, including in Hubei where the virus erupted in December. For the families, none of the complex and comforting rituals, full of filial piety, to ensure a peaceful journey to the

afterlife: all-night vigils, white mourning clothes, visitors paying their last respects around the carefully dressed body in the coffin, perhaps Taoist or Buddhist prayers.

A funeral home in Jingzhou was quiet. Hazmat suits hung outside a room where workers who carry bodies from the hospital to the crematorium were napping. For families in quarantine, it is lonelier still, as they cannot even honor the ashes of the dead. "What did we do to deserve such punishment?" Wang Wenjun in Hubei's provincial capital Wuhan told Reuters last month, after her family had to wait 15 days for the ashes of her uncle, who died from COVID-19, the pneumonia-like disease caused by the new coronavirus.

Without funerals Sheng's staff, like crematorium workers across much of China, get right to work, some in full surgical outfits with blue coveralls and hair covers like blue shower caps. "In the past, before the epidemic, there would be a vigil of up to three

days and we would carry out our work after," said Sheng, a red China flag pin in the lapel of his white lab coat. "But now when the person dies, the hospital will carry out the disinfection and the cremation will happen right after."

Staff at the facility where Sheng has worked for 29 years now take shifts around the clock, in case a call comes from the hospital in the middle of the night to collect the body of a coronavirus victim, he said. Previously, they cremated bodies in the morning. "The hospital workers are working very hard but so are the funeral workers," he said. Easing the burden somewhat of late has been the slowdown in domestic virus cases and a drop in

traffic deaths as harsh restrictions on movement curtail driving.

Of the crematorium's eight furnaces, one is dedicated to coronavirus victims, whose families may not see the body before it is cremated. For people who die of the disease at home, staff in full protective gear

are asked to do a quick pickup, he said. "Maybe it's something to do with the air, we don't know why." China has reported more than 81,000 coronavirus infections and 3,300 deaths, mostly in Wuhan, where the virus is thought to have first infected people at a seafood market.

Jingzhou, a transportation and tourism hub of 6 million people 220 km west of Wuhan, is Hubei's sixth-worst-hit city, with 1,580 infections and 52 deaths - half of those bodies were cremated at Sheng's facility, he says. Recently, China's locally transmitted infections have fallen sharply, the government says - Wuhan has reported only one new coronavirus case in the last 10 days. The United States now has more cases than China, and Italy and Spain higher death tolls.

The sharp slowdown has given Beijing confidence to start easing the draconian lockdowns and travel restrictions put in place to curb the virus. Hubei began letting residents leave the province on Tuesday, although people are not yet allowed in. Sheng has yet to receive official notice when life might return to normal at the Jingzhou crematorium. Possibly by the end of April, he says. For now, quarantines remain in place and the simple, state-supplied urns sit. — Reuters

## Arab, Jewish medics together on frontline of Israel's virus fight

**JERUSALEM:** In Israel, Jewish and Arab doctors have worked side by side on the frontlines of the novel coronavirus fight, also battling entrenched schisms between their communities and stressing their unity in the face of the crisis. Israel's Sheba Medical Center, near the city of Tel Aviv, is ranked among the best in the world and its directors say its standing is thanks to a team of Arab and Jewish caregivers working together in a society otherwise marked by divisions.

"We work together with Arab medical staff everywhere and not just in the time of coronavirus. There is no difference between us," Sheba deputy director emeritus, Rafi Walden said. "Without them, the Israeli medical system would collapse." Israel's Arab minority are the descendants of Palestinians who stayed on their land after the creation of Israel in 1948. They make up around 20 percent of the population, but slightly more of the country's health care workers.

The community regularly says it faces social discrimination and denounces a law that enshrines the Jewish character of Israel. But as the Jewish state struggles against the deadly novel coronavirus, the crisis is highlighting the collaborative nature of its health service. A photo shared widely on social media this week showed two medics pausing to pray in front of their ambulance. One was Jewish - standing and praying in the direction of Jerusalem - and the other a Muslim, who laid out his prayer rug and knelt facing towards Mecca.

Some internet users praised the image published by Israel's equivalent of the Red Cross,



BEERSHEBA: Two paramedics pray outside an ambulance of the American Friends of Magen David Adom (AFMDA); a Jew from Beersheba facing Jerusalem, and an Arab from Rahat facing Makkah. — AFP

the Magen David Adom, as "inspiring" and underscored the need for unity in a crisis. Others took the opportunity to highlight the inequalities faced by the Arab minority. According to a 2017 study by the Taub Center for Social Policy Studies in Israel, poverty rates are far higher in Arab neighborhoods, where the average life expectancy is also four years lower than among Jewish Israelis.

### 'In the trenches together'

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has long faced accusations of racism towards the Arab minority and of inciting hatred against members of Arab political parties. He has described them as a "threat" to the country and one of his ministers has called them "terrorists in suits".

"Netanyahu knows the role of Arabs in the health service and in other sectors and he continues to spread hatred against Arabs and to lie

unabashedly," Walden said. Recently, nearly 700 Israeli medical professionals, roughly half of them Arab and half Jewish, signed a petition calling on Netanyahu to stop sowing division during a public health crisis. More than 3,800 cases of the novel coronavirus have been reported by Israel as of Sunday, and 12 people have died.

After more than a year of political turmoil marked by three inconclusive general elections, Netanyahu is expected to remain in power and form an "emergency government" to manage the virus outbreak after a surprise agreement by his rival Benny Gantz to work with the premier. "Our goal, both Arabs and Jews, is to protect humanity, and we call for an end to incitement to hatred. We're in the trenches together working to stop the coronavirus epidemic," said Shukri Awawda, a senior doctor in the Arab city of Nazareth and one of those who spearheaded the petition. — AFP

## Virus lockdowns give Europe cities cleaner air

**BRUSSELS:** Air pollution has decreased in urban areas across Europe during lockdowns to combat the coronavirus, new satellite images showed yesterday, but campaigners warned city-dwellers were still more vulnerable to the epidemic. Cities including Brussels, Paris, Madrid, Milan and Frankfurt showed a reduction in average levels of noxious nitrogen dioxide over March 5-25, compared with the same period last year, according to the Sentinel-5 satellite images.

That coincides with lockdowns in many European countries which have curbed road transport - the largest source of nitrogen oxides - and slowed output at gas-emitting factories. The new images, released by the European Space Agency (ESA) and analysed by the non-profit European Public Health Alliance (EPHA), show the changing density of nitrogen dioxide, which can cause respiratory problems and cancer, like heat maps.

Daily weather events can influence atmospheric pollution, so the satellite pictures took a 20-day average and excluded readings where cloud cover reduced the quality of the data. Data from the European Environment Agency (EEA) showed a similar trend over March 16-22. In Madrid, average nitrogen dioxide levels decreased by 56% week-on-week after the Spanish government banned non-essential travel on March 14.

The EPHA said people living in polluted cities may be more at risk from COVID-19, because prolonged exposure to bad air can weaken the immune system, making it harder to fight infection. "That connection is very likely," Zoltan Massay-Kosubek, policy manager for clean air at EPHA, told Reuters. "But because the disease is new, it still has to be demonstrated." Air pollution can cause or exacerbate lung cancer, pulmonary disease and strokes.

China also recorded a drop in nitrogen dioxide pollution in cities during February, when the government imposed draconian lockdown measures to contain the raging epidemic. In some regions of Poland, however, nitrogen dioxide levels remained relatively high during the period despite its lockdown, perhaps due to the prevalence of coal-based heating. Countries that went into lockdown later - such as Britain, which did so on March 23 - look set for a pollution reprieve in coming weeks, EPHA said. Air pollution causes around 400,000 premature deaths each year in Europe, EEA data show. — Reuters