

International

Trump ditches hopes of quick virus bounce-back

Spain announces record 838 virus deaths in 24 hours

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump has extended emergency coronavirus restrictions for the United States, where his top scientist warned up to 200,000 people could die, as the Russian capital and Africa's biggest city readied to go into lockdown yesterday. The reassessment by Trump, who had previously said he wanted the country back to work in mid-April, came as Britain and hard-hit Italy warned measures to prevent the spread of the disease would be in place for months to come.

COVID-19 has already killed more than 33,000 people worldwide, with the number of confirmed cases nearing 700,000. As of Sunday, more than 3.38 billion people were asked or ordered to follow confinement measures, according to an AFP database, as the virus infects every sphere of life—wiping out millions of jobs, postponing elections and clearing the sporting calendar. Trump warned that the US crisis, which has seen a doubling of infections in only two days, would continue to get worse.

"The modelling estimates that the peak in death rate is likely to hit in two weeks," he said, announcing an extension of social distancing guidelines until April 30. "Nothing would be worse than declaring victory before the victory is won."

The president was speaking after Anthony Fauci, who leads research into infectious diseases at the National Institutes of Health, said he believed 100,000 to 200,000 Americans could die from the disease, and millions could be infected.

The US health system is groaning under the weight of new cases. On Sunday a charity began setting up a field hospital in New York's Central Park to help take some of the strain off the city's overwhelmed institutions. "There's lots of cases here in New York and a lot of people that need help," said Elliott Tenpenny, a doctor and team leader for Samaritan's Purse COVID-19 Response Team.

"The hospitals all over the city are filling up and they need as much help as they can get. That's why we're here." The human consequences of a shutdown that has seen

huge chunks of the US economy grind to a halt were playing out at food banks, where organizers say demand has exploded. "Before, there were 1.2 million people in New York who needed help for food. Now, there are three times as many," said Eric Ripert of City Harvest, a food rescue organization.

Six months

Trump's re-evaluation of a back-to-normal timeline came as Europe's situation continued to worsen. Spain logged 838 deaths in a 24-hour period, the third consecutive day it has seen a rise. "My ICU (intensive care unit) is completely full," said Eduardo Fernandez, a nurse at Infanta Sofia hospital in Madrid, where authorities have set up a 5,500-bed field hospital and transformed an ice rink into a morgue. "If it is not a complete collapse, we are on the verge," he added. British officials said life may not return to usual for six months, with Deputy Chief Medical Officer Jenny Harries saying it would be several weeks before doctors could tell if the current lockdown had slowed the spread of the disease. Measures would be

reviewed every three weeks, "probably over the next six months" or even longer, she said.

In Italy, which has logged a third of global deaths, the government warned citizens should be ready for a lengthy lockdown that would only be lifted gradually. "We are in a very long battle," said government medical adviser Luca Richeldi. "Through our behavior, we save lives." Yet the strains on Italian society imposed by measures that might have seemed unimaginable just weeks ago are gradually starting to show. The starkest example came when armed police began guarding entrances to supermarkets in Sicily after reports of looting by people who could no longer afford food.

Global divide

Moscow became the latest European city to tell people to stay indoors. Citizens will only be allowed to

leave their homes in a medical emergency, to travel to jobs judged essential by the authorities, and to shop for food or medicines. They will, however, be allowed to walk their dogs within a 100-metre radius of their homes. Africa's biggest city, Lagos, was due to join the global stay-at-home from yesterday, with Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari ordering a two-week lockdown for its 20 million people.

The measures also apply to the capital Abuja. Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation with some 190 million people, has so far registered just 97 confirmed infections and one death from COVID-19, but testing has been limited. Officials have warned that the country risks seeing an "exponential" rise in cases unless contacts of suspected carriers are tracked down faster.

mafias, to see how much they can earn from this pandemic," Italian anti-mafia author Roberto Saviano said in an interview in the Repubblica daily this week. "Where have they invested the last few decades? Multi-service companies (canteens, cleaning, disinfection), waste recycling, transportation, funeral homes, oil and food distribution. That's how they'll make money. "The mafias know what you have, and will need, and they give it, and will give it, on their own terms."

Saviano pointed to the last big epidemic in Italy, the 1884 Cholera outbreak in Naples, which killed more than half of the city's inhabitants. The government paid out vast sums for a clean-up - which went straight into the pockets of the Camorra. The mafia "is already carefully planning ahead to when the economy will start to be rebuilt," said Saviano, who heads up Italy's anti-mafia investigation directorate (DIA). "There will be a lot of money going around."

The 62-year old Sicilian said his team was preparing a plan to combat mafia infiltration. "They will be looking for loopholes in the system. We'll have to keep our eyes open for... suspicious operations, the creation of new companies, dummy corporations." Giuseppe Pignatone, a former mafia-hunter in Reggio Calabria, said the epidemic would "inevitably make the judiciary's job more difficult over the coming weeks and years". The trials of hundreds of defendants have ground to a halt.



NEW YORK: An elderly man is transported from Lenox Health Medical Pavilion to an ambulance in New York City. A senior US scientist issued a cautious prediction that the novel coronavirus could claim 100,000 to 200,000 lives in the United States. —AFP

Up to 200,000 people could die, scientist warns



Mafia primed to feast on Italy's virus devastation

ROME: As Italy mourns thousands of coronavirus dead, and survivors brace for life in an economic wasteland, one rung of society looks to win big: organized crime. "The Italian mafia can turn threats into opportunities," top government anti-mafia investigator Giuseppe Governale said. Over 10,000 people have died in Italy of the flu-like disease, which has forced the country into a lockdown that is devastating the eurozone's third largest economy.

From the historic Cosa Nostra in Sicily, to the immensely powerful 'Ndrangheta in Calabria and trigger-happy Camorra in Naples, Italy's mafias were "caught on the back foot (by the virus), but are now organising themselves," Governale said. The Economist Intelligence Unit said Thursday it expected Italy's GDP to contract by a colossal seven percent for the year. Italian experts say some 65 percent of Italian small and medium businesses are at risk of bankruptcy. That is music to the ears of the country's mobs, who use extortion and usury to feast on ailing businesses.

'On their terms'

"Just look at the portfolio of the

Demand explodes for New York food banks

NEW YORK: New York food banks have become inundated with newcomers deprived of income since the near-total halt of business in the United States' economic capital. Sacks of oranges, sweet potatoes and onions are spread over three tables at an open-air market in Washington Heights, a neighborhood in the north of Manhattan. Sterilized milk and cans of tuna and salmon cover three others.

Hundreds of people came over the weekend to restock at the distribution center, one of many run by City Harvest, a major New York-based charity. There are no long lines reminiscent of the soup kitchens of the 1930s. Instead, people trickle in, often wearing masks for protection and keeping their distance from each other under the direction of market volunteers.

Among the customers is Lina Alba, 40, a single mother with five children aged between 11 and 23. She worked as a maid in a Manhattan hotel until it closed two weeks ago. Her two oldest children also lost their jobs. "It is my first time," she said. "We need the help now. This is crazy. So we don't know what's gonna happen in a few weeks." She's trying

to stay positive, though. "At least I'm spending time with my kids... I am the teacher, I am the mom - I am everything." "We are alive, we are healthy, we just need to pray."

It took the single mother a week to register for unemployment — the service flooded, pointing to much worse unemployment numbers than those announced by the federal government on Thursday. But on Friday, "I did it, finally," Alba said, relieved. The benefits should start arriving in three weeks. Alba also hopes to receive soon at least \$1,200 from the federal government, thanks to a historic aid package passed last week by Congress. "It's not gonna be enough," but "you're gonna appreciate anything right now," she said, noting that "a lot of people" need help. "It is the whole entire city."

Millions need help

Jose Neri, 51, is one of many Hispanic employees who worked in now-closed New York restaurants. He also came to a food bank for the first time. There are five people in his family. "We're using our savings to survive," he said in Spanish, wearing a mask and gloves in an effort to prevent himself from catching the virus. "We've got what we need to hold it together for now," he said. He is also counting on the federal government's promised assistance to low-income workers. Jhordana Ramirez, 39, has to keep working, despite the high risk of infection in a city that has recorded tens of thousands of cases.

She's a home caregiver for senior citizens, who "depend 100 percent" on her, she explained in

Enforcing a total lockdown will be a mammoth challenge for authorities in a country where tens of millions live in poverty and rely on their daily earnings to survive.

The same holds true for large parts of Africa. In Benin, President Patrice Talon said his country could not enforce public confinement because it lacks the "means of rich countries." Aid groups have warned that the coronavirus toll in the developed world could pale compared with the devastation it wreaks on defenseless populations in poor states and war zones such as Syria and Yemen. Three billion people around the world lack access to running water and soap, the most basic weapons of protection against the virus, according to UN experts. —AFP

News in brief

Saudi seizes hoarded masks

RIYADH: Saudi authorities have seized more than five million medical masks that were illegally stockpiled amid the coronavirus outbreak, state media reported Sunday, as the death toll in the kingdom doubled. The commerce ministry seized 1.17 million masks from a private store in Hail, northwest of the capital, after authorities Wednesday confiscated more than four million masks stored in a facility in the western city of Jeddah in violation of commercial regulations, the official Saudi Press Agency reported. The ministry said people behind such activities would be prosecuted, and that the confiscated masks would be redistributed to the open market. Pharmacies in the oil-rich kingdom have reported shortages of masks amid panic buying, as authorities warned against hoarding and price hikes. Saudi Arabia is scrambling to limit the spread of the deadly disease at home. —AFP

Mass prison break in Iran

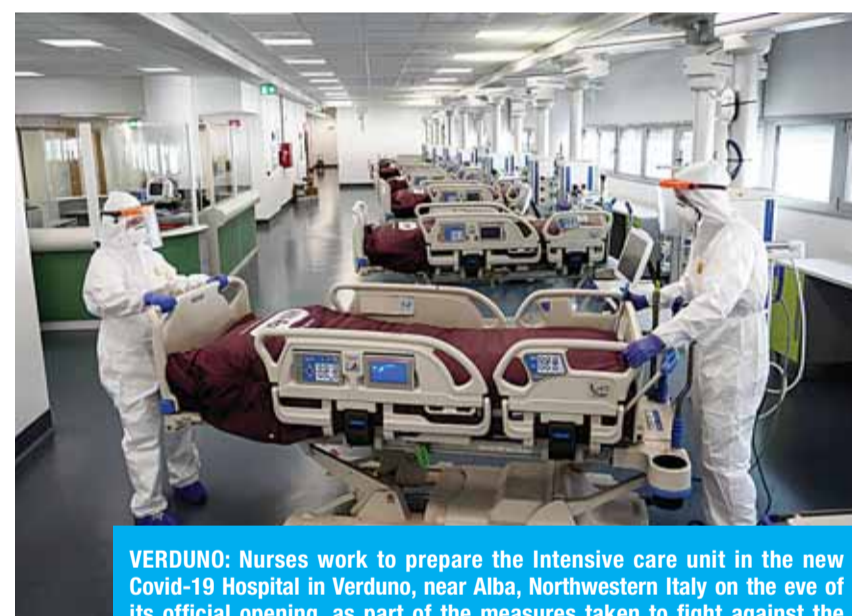
TEHRAN: Iranian security forces are searching for 54 escaped inmates following a prison break over which four guards were arrested, Iran's state news agency reported yesterday. "Some prison guards were summoned and four of them were arrested and others released on bail," Mojtaba Shirouzbazorgi, a judicial official in Kurdistan province, told IRNA. According to the agency, 74 inmates escaped from Saqqez city's prison on Friday, 20 of whom have so far either turned themselves in or been captured. On March 19, 23 prisoners escaped from another jail in the western city of Khorramabad, the capital of Lorestan province, hours before the start of Iran's New Year celebrations, IRNA said. They reportedly escaped during the night while guards were making preparations for a New Year amnesty. The escapees had been serving a maximum of one-year sentences, the agency said, denying that dangerous criminals were at large. —AFP

Egypt shuts several hospitals

CAIRO: Egypt has shuttered several hospitals and quarantined villages in an attempt to halt the rising infection rate of new coronavirus in the most populous Arab state. A Cairo hospital was closed for sterilization late Saturday after two COVID-19 cases were confirmed. An official at Al-Salam hospital told AFP on Sunday: "We are currently disinfecting the hospital for the safety of everyone concerned. One patient had come in tested positive and a member of our staff was infected after". He said no date was yet set for re-opening the facility. Other hospitals have also been closed in the last week after recording cases of the virus, including the Alexandria University Hospital and Al-Shorouk hospital in Cairo. Health ministry spokesperson Khaled Megahed also announced that villages in up to 10 governorates have been quarantined. —AFP

Libya frees over 450 inmates

TRIPOLI: Libya's justice ministry announced Sunday over 450 prisoners were being freed in a bid to protect against the spread of coronavirus in the wake of the war-torn country's first declared infections. Judicial officials decided to "free 466 detainees from correctional facilities" in Tripoli, according to a statement by the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord's justice ministry. The detainees were in pretrial detention or had qualified for conditional release, the statement added. Authorities announced five new coronavirus cases in the western city of Misrata on Sunday, bringing the tally of infections confirmed in Libya to eight. —Reuters



VERDUNO: Nurses work to prepare the intensive care unit in the new Covid-19 Hospital in Verduno, near Alba, Northwestern Italy on the eve of its official opening, as part of the measures taken to fight against the spread of the novel coronavirus. The hospital has seven beds of intensive care and fifty beds for patients infected by the COVID-19. —AFP

'Real danger'

The redirection of police resources over the crisis could also contribute to the mafia blossoming, as officers "already weighed down by new roles may have to face public order problems," he said. According to the Stampa daily, Italy's secret service has warned the government of potential riots in southern Italy - fomented by organized crime groups - should the virus epicenter move from north to south.

Mobsters were believed by some crime experts to have orchestrated revolts in jails across the country early

ly on in the epidemic, with prisoners fearful of catching the disease in overcrowded facilities demanding early release. "Very worryingly, some with lighter sentences are being allowed out," Nicola Gratteri, a leading prosecutor in the 'Ndrangheta stronghold of Calabria said. Rights group Antigone said over 2,500 prisoners had been released since February 29 to ease overcrowding. "People linked to the 'Ndrangheta have already been released and put under house arrest," he said. "That presents a real danger". —AFP

Spanish. The pandemic has had an "enormous" effect on her household, she said. Her husband and oldest daughter lost their jobs. Her youngest daughter, just eight years old, is "anxious" and can't keep still. "I try to save as much as possible, especially for the rent, bills like electricity, cable, food and all those things," she said. She is also impatiently waiting for her federal check.

City Harvest employee Geraldine Fermin has heard stories like this a lot since most New York City business closed down two weeks ago. "It's heartbreaking that it has to be like that for a lot of people," she said. "People that were poor are now poorer, and people that had decent jobs, that could get by, now are poor too." "Before, there were 1.2 million people in New York who needed help for food. Now, there are three times as many, that's more than three million New Yorkers," said City Harvest vice president Eric Ripert.

Ripert also owns the famous restaurant Le Bernardin, closed due to the coronavirus. Speaking in French, Ripert said that City Harvest, which in addition to its markets also supplies food to some 400 homeless shelters, does not currently have any supply problems. But it needs funds to buy more food, and so it is teaming up with other organizations to create a united front against "a situation that will get worse." "We got through September 11, the great recession of 2008-2009, we got through a lot of things, but none of that is comparable to this catastrophe that we're living through," Ripert said. —AFP