

International

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Virus pandemic politics costing lives in Brazil

Turkey turns to medical diplomacy to heal damaged relations

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WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump speaks during a press briefing about coronavirus testing in the Rose Garden of the White House on May 11, 2020 in Washington, DC. — AFP

Trump abruptly ends press briefing

Concerns over virus spreading in White House

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump abruptly ended his coronavirus press briefing on Monday after getting into a testy exchange with an Asian-American reporter. CBS News reporter Weijia Jiang asked Trump why he continued to insist that the US was doing better than other countries when it came to testing for the virus. "Why does that matter?" she asked. "Why is this a global competition when, every day, Americans are still losing their lives?" "They're losing their lives everywhere in the world," Trump replied. "And maybe that's a question you should ask China. Don't ask me, ask China that question, OK?"

Jiang, who identifies herself in her Twitter bio as a "Chinese born West Virginian," pushed back. "Sir, why are you saying that to me specifically?" she said, implying it was due to her race. "I'm saying it to anybody who would ask a nasty question like that," Trump said. He then attempted to move on to another reporter as Jiang continued to press him about his response. Trump called on another female reporter but then immediately called on someone else. When the woman tried to ask her question, Trump abruptly ended the press conference and walked back into the White House.

The internet was quick to rally round Jiang, with the hashtag #StandWithWeijiaJiang soon trending on Twitter. "I #StandWithWeijiaJiang against Trump's racist tantrums," tweeted "Star Trek" actor and prominent Asian-American activist George Takei. Reporter and CNN political analyst April Ryan, who has also been on the receiving end of Trump's words, tweeted: "Welcome to the club! This is sickening! It is his habit!" Trump, who has never been shy about his dislike for the news media, has often locked horns with journalists

during his coronavirus press briefings. More than 80,000 people have died in the US from the coronavirus pandemic, out of more than 1.3 million cases, according to the latest figures on Monday from Johns Hopkins University, by far the highest death toll of any country.

Virus in White House

Meanwhile, US President has dismissed concerns over the possible spread of coronavirus in the White House but said he may limit contact with Vice President Mike Pence. Trump, speaking to masked reporters in the White House Rose Garden, suggested that Pence was in quarantine after his press secretary tested positive, though he did not say it outright. Katie Miller, the spokeswoman for Pence, who heads the White House's coronavirus task force, tested positive for coronavirus last week along with a personal valet to Trump.

Three members of the task force have since gone into quarantine - infectious disease expert Anthony Fauci, Robert Redfield, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and Stephen Hahn, head of the Food and Drug Administration. A Pence spokesman denied over the weekend that the vice president was also in quarantine but Trump suggested he was when asked on Monday whether he had considered limiting his contact with him.

"I would say that he and I will be talking about that," Trump said at an occasionally testy press conference.

"During this quarantine period, we'll probably talk," Trump said. "I have not seen him since then." "We can talk on the phone," he said of Pence. "He tested negative, so we have to understand that, but he comes into contact with a lot of people."

'No vulnerability whatsoever'

Trump sought to play down any concerns about an outbreak of the virus in the cramped quarters of the West Wing, where the president works out of the Oval Office. "We want to keep our country running so we have a lot of people coming in and out (of the White House) and many of those people, most of those people, are tested," he said. "Everybody coming into the president's office gets tested, and I've felt no vulnerability whatsoever," he said. Trump, who is desperately seeking to reboot the economy ahead of the November election, said the US was making "tremendous strides" in ramping up testing and the number of virus infections is "coming down very rapidly."

He said it was essential to get the country reopened. "The people want our country open," the president said. "Some states could be moving more quickly," he said. "People are dying in the lockdown position too." Trump abruptly ended the press conference after an exchange with a CBS News reporter who asked him why when Americans were losing their lives did he keep insisting that the US was doing better than other countries when it came to testing. "Well, they're losing

their lives everywhere in the world," Trump said. "And maybe that's a question you should ask China. Don't ask me, ask China that question, OK?" The CBS reporter, Weijia Jiang, who is of Chinese-American origin, then asked Trump "Sir, why are you saying that to me specifically?" "I'm telling. I'm saying it to anybody who would ask a nasty question like that," Trump replied before abruptly ending the press conference.

'Scary to go to work'

Though it may appear spacious in movies and TV shows, the West Wing is actually rather cramped, making social distancing difficult. It houses not just the president's office but also those of some of his closest advisers, the press briefing room and the desks of White House correspondents, who work elbow to elbow. Kevin Hassett, a senior economic advisor to the president, told CBS over the weekend that it is "scary to go to work." "I would be safer sitting at home in my house than going into a West Wing that with even all the testing in the world and the best medical team on Earth, is a relatively cramped place," Hassett told another network, CNN.

In a memo issued on Monday, the White House instructed all staff to wear a mask when inside the West Wing, except when at their desks. Unlike a number of other world leaders, the 73-year-old Trump has not been wearing a mask in public. He said Monday that Americans have "learned about face masks." "The good and the bad, by the way," he said. "It's not a one-sided thing, believe it or not," Trump said without elaborating. The United States is the country the hardest-hit by the virus with more than 80,000 deaths and 1.3 million infections.— Agencies



'Don't ask me, ask China that question, OK'

Lebanon fears second coronavirus wave as new infections surge

BEIRUT: Lebanese authorities warned of a new wave of coronavirus cases after the number jumped to its highest point in more than a month as the government eased some restrictions on public life. The country has been under lockdown since mid-March to rein in an outbreak that has infected 859 people and killed 26.

Lebanon started lifting restrictions last week as part of a longer-term plan, letting restaurants, hair salons, construction sites and other businesses open so far at lower capacity. But the government may shut the country down again to ward off any resurgence, with Lebanon's higher defense council set to convene on Tuesday. Beirut airport has been closed for nearly two months, except for thousands of expatriates returning home, some of whom have added to the rise in infections. More flights repatriating Lebanese are expected.

After a drop in cases which the government hailed as a success, the health ministry recorded 36 new infections on Sunday, the highest one-shot uptick in at least a month, and 14 more on Monday. The ministry asked the Lebanese to remain patient and stick to safety guidelines to prevent a second wave. More than 10 people got infected after an expat who returned from Nigeria last week received visitors, a



BEIRUT: Nurses gathered to attend a mass celebrated by a priest in the coronavirus COVID-19 section of the hospital, in the neighborhood of Ashrafieh of the Lebanese capital Beirut's eastern suburbs. — AFP

ministry official said. The man, who had tested negative when he first arrived, did not comply with self-isolation rules.

One of those infected, an army soldier, then carried the virus to a military court where 13 others also caught it. The interior ministry has extended the hours

of an overnight curfew, from 7 pm to 5 am, warning that most businesses may have to shut again if the danger persists. The pandemic has compounded woes in Lebanon, which was already wrestling with a financial crisis that has slashed more than half the value of its currency since late last year. — Reuters

Syrian clashes kill 48; highest toll since truce

BEIRUT: Clashes in northwest Syria killed 48 regime fighters and jihadists Sunday in the highest such death toll since the start of a two-month-old ceasefire there, a monitor said. A truce since March 6 had largely stemmed fighting in Syria's last major rebel bastion of Idlib after a months-long regime assault that killed hundreds of civilians and forced almost a million to flee. But before dawn on Sunday rebels attacked the positions of pro-regime fighters on the western flank of the jihadist-dominated region, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. The clashes in the Sahl al-Ghab area killed 35 regime fighters as well as 13 jihadists including from the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Hurras al-Deen group, the Britain-based monitor said.

"It's the highest death toll for fighters since the truce came into force," said Observatory chief Rami Abdel Rahman, who relies on sources inside Syria. "There had been intermittent clashes and mutual bombardment between both sides before, but this is the most violent attack yet." Abdel Rahman said clashes were ongoing after dark on Sunday night. The Idlib region of some three million people is dominated by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham group led by Syria's former Al-Qaeda affiliate, but other jihadists such as Hurras al-Deen and rebel groups are also present.— AFP