

## International

## Europe, New York start emerging from lockdown

## Fresh COVID-19 cases hit Asia

NEW YORK: Swathes of Europe as well as New York began the long process of reopening from coronavirus lockdowns on Monday, but a resurgence of infections in China and South Korea offered a sobering reminder of the dangers of a second wave of cases. The mixed fortunes illustrate the high-wire act governments face across the globe as they try to resuscitate shattered economies while keeping in check a pandemic that has now killed some 284,000 people and infected more than 4.1 million.

For the second straight day, the United States recorded fewer than 900 days over the past 24 hours although the toll shot past 80,000, by far the highest in the world, according to Johns Hopkins University. New York, the worst-hit US state, gave the green light to return gradually this week to normal life - but not yet in packed New York City, which will wait at least until June.

"We start a new chapter today," Governor Andrew Cuomo told reporters, adding, "It's an exciting new phase: we're all anxious to get back to work." As France and Spain embraced new freedoms and Britain also announced plans for a partial reopening, the Chinese city of Wuhan where the pandemic was born reported a second day of new cases after a month without a sign of the virus. And South Korea announced its highest number of infections for more than a month driven by a cluster in a Seoul nightlife district.

With millions out of work and economies badly bruised, governments are desperate to hit the accelerator, but most are choosing a gradual approach as fears about a resurgence of the virus loom large. In parts of Europe, officials have been emboldened by promising trends, with Spain's daily fatalities falling to 123 and Italy - once Europe's epicenter - reporting fewer than 1,000 patients in intensive care, the lowest since March 10 before the peak of its outbreak. France has seen its daily fatalities decline for several

days but reported an uptick on Monday with 263, as it began to dismantle a military field hospital set up when hospitals were being inundated.

The French were able to venture outdoors without filling in a permit for the first time in nearly eight weeks on Monday, and some shops reopened their doors. The wide boulevards of the Champs-Élysées in Paris were once again back to life with cars and shoppers waiting patiently to make purchases, but things were not as before. Police swarmed in to break up picnickers who defied guidelines to gather together without masks.

Many Spaniards revelled in being able to visit outdoor terraces and cafes again after months under one of the world's toughest lockdowns, although virus hotspots such as Madrid and Barcelona remain under wraps. "I really missed this, now you value these little pleasures," said Jesus Vazquez, a 51-year-old builder, as he enjoyed a sandwich and beer in the sunshine outside a bar in the city of Tarragona. Shopping strips were once again populated in Greece, while in other parts of Europe from the Netherlands to Switzerland and Croatia youngsters headed back to the classroom after weeks at home.

In the Czech Republic some teens revelled in being able to go to the cinema again - a novel outing after months of lockdown. "I wanted to see what it's like just to go and see a film with my friends again," 16-year-old Tomas Fohler said from behind a mask, now compulsory in the country. Germany too has set in motion the reopening of shops, eateries, schools and gyms, but Chancellor Angela Merkel refreshed warnings to stay safe after official data showed the infection rate picking up speed again.

"It is necessary that we can have confidence that people are actually sticking to the basic guidelines, so keeping distance, covering mouth and nose, being considerate of each other," she said Monday. In Britain, the gov-



284,000 people killed, more than 4.1 million infected



NEW YORK: Medical workers from Lenox Hill Hospital come outside while people show gratitude as part of the nightly #ClapBecauseWeCare during the coronavirus pandemic in New York City. — AFP

ernment unveiled a "cautious roadmap" setting out new freedoms which included outdoor exercise and allowing construction, manufacturing and other manual workers back on the job. Almost seven weeks after a nationwide stay-at-home order was put in place, more than 31,800 people have died in Britain - a figure second only to the United States.

Russian President Vladimir Putin also said that stay-at-home orders will be eased for most workers this week, despite a surge of 10,000 new coronavirus cases every day. US President Donald Trump, facing re-election in November, has been especially eager to end restrictions - and insisted the White House was safe, even as he said he would limit contact with Vice President Mike Pence, whose press secretary tested positive.

"Everybody coming into the president's office gets tested, and I've felt no vulnerability whatsoever," Trump said in a testy news conference that he abruptly ended.

With governments across the world trying to avoid a second wave, Asian nations that were among the first engulfed by the virus but have since brought it to heel are being keenly watched. Much of China has begun to get back to a form of normality, and on Monday Shanghai Disneyland threw open its gates following a three-month shutdown. "We are very much looking forward to the first day of reopening," said one eager visitor named Kitty. "We have stayed at home for around two months and got bored enough." But enthusiasm in China was tempered by news on Sunday that one person had tested

positive for the virus in Wuhan. There were five more cases on Monday.

Local health officials said the new infections were all from the same residential compound and were mostly older people. South Korean officials ordered nightclubs and bars closed after a new cluster of at least 86 cases linked to an entertainment district in the capital - many in gay clubs. Officials scrambled to trace thousands of people who visited the area, but efforts were hampered with many believed to be reluctant to come forward because of the stigma surrounding homosexuality. "If you hesitate a single day, our daily clock may stop for a month. Please contact the nearest clinic or health center right now," urged Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun. — AFP

## Biden ramps up digital footprint



VIRGINIA: A man wearing a face mask walks past signs for Joe Biden's 2020 presidential campaign amid the coronavirus outbreak in Alexandria, Virginia. — AFP

WASHINGTON: Joe Biden is rapidly scaling up his digital campaign as he scrambles to compete with Donald Trump's formidable online operation, but Democrats say the presidential hopeful must move beyond flat speeches delivered from his basement. The Democratic Party's presumptive nominee is doubling the size of his digital team—currently at a reported 25 people—and his campaign said Monday it is launching a flood-the-zone approach across multiple online platforms.

But with November's election less than six months away and traditional campaigning halted due to the coronavirus pandemic, Biden is in an awkward spot. While Biden talks into a camera in an empty basement studio in Delaware where he is under stay-at-home orders, Trump is center-stage, acting—successfully or not—to address the crisis and reopen the shuttered economy. The contrast was driven home last week when Biden's virtual rally in Florida was marred by technical glitches.

Some Democratic campaign experts have described Biden's basement tapes as too static and packaged. Strategists have openly worried that Biden is already dangerously behind Trump on key metrics across platforms including Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram. The 77-year-old former vice president will need to rapidly adjust to new political realities if he is to compete with a president whose data-mining and voter targeting operations are vast. The 2020 election is "a battle for the soul of this nation," Biden likes to say.

"But it's also a battle for the soul of the internet. And it's a battle we intend to

win." Biden's digital director Rob Flaherty tweeted Saturday as he announced several new hires. They include senior digital advisor Caitlin Mitchell, a former top staffer for Elizabeth Warren's presidential campaign. Trump's online effort has been fire and brimstone since Day 1. Last week campaign chair Brad Parscale likened Trump's organized digital campaign to attacks by the "Death Star" from Star Wars. Biden's campaign argues that Biden reflects Americans' desire for a leader with skills and experience to get the job done.

The message? "He's ready to lead in a moment of crisis like this, and that he has the compassion and empathy that Trump has been sorely lacking," Biden deputy rapid response director Mike Gwin told AFP. Just how Biden gets that message out may be the campaign's defining question. "Online speeches from his basement won't cut it," warned Barack Obama campaign veterans David Axelrod and David Plouffe in a recent New York Times essay. "In order to break through and be heard, (Biden) will have to up the tempo of his campaign, fully utilize his army of powerful surrogates and embrace a new suite of virtual, data-driven tools and creative tactics."

The campaign argues it is on its way, with Biden videos, ads or events viewed online 112 million times since mid-March. Democratic strategist Lis Smith said Biden must master the digital genre. "There was a conventional wisdom for a long time that Joe Biden was screwed because he was stuck in the basement" during coronavirus, Smith said in a Politico webcast Monday. — AFP

## Pandemic pushing millions of Mexicans into poverty

MEXICO CITY: The economic fallout from coronavirus could add nine million people to Mexico's poor, according to a government study released on Monday calling for aid like pensions and insurance in the country that provides no federal jobless benefits. Increased hardship could translate to at least 70 million Mexicans, 56% of the country, not earning enough to cover basic needs, said CONEVAL, the autonomous public agency that measures poverty.

That would be an increase from about 50% in 2018. Mexico's overall poverty rate, a different measure that includes income and factors like education and access to food, dropped in the decade before 2018 to about 42% of the population, it said. During that time, access to health care and the quality of housing improved most, the report said.

The general conclusion is that this crisis threatens Mexico's advances in social development and will disproportionately affect the most vulnerable groups," CONEVAL said. "Facing this challenge, it is necessary to broaden and strengthen the response measures." Mexico has about 35,000 confirmed cases of coronavirus, which has killed at least 3,400 people. With businesses forced to close to help stop the spread of the disease, more than 346,000 formal jobs were lost between mid-March and early April, the government said, with further layoffs expected as the economy shrinks.

CONEVAL suggested policymakers consider introducing minimum universal pensions, unemployment insurance or universal basic incomes to help the most vulnerable. Currently, there is little help for workers who lose their jobs because Mexico has no federal unemployment ben-



MEXICO CITY: A coffin is seen during a protest against alleged human rights violations committed against COVID-19 patients in the state of Nuevo Leon, in front of the National Palace in Mexico City during the novel coronavirus pandemic. — AFP

efits. Jobless workers are mostly forced to rely on savings, their families or upon private charity to survive.

The effects of losing a job are long lasting, and many workers in Mexico earn salaries near the poverty line, said David Kaplan, lead labor market specialist at the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), a lender to governments in the region. "It doesn't take a big hit to knock these people into poverty," he said. In Mexico, women have been particularly vulnerable to the pandemic as they make up the majority of healthcare workers and face longer hours, risk of illness and housekeeping responsibilities, the report said. — Reuters

## Low-skilled men suffer highest COVID fatalities in England and Wales

LONDON: Men in the lowest-skilled jobs have the highest death rates involving COVID-19 among working-age people, according to data for England and Wales that also showed fatalities among nurses and doctors were no higher than the average. Monday's official figures were published after Prime Minister Boris Johnson said on Sunday that manufacturing and construction workers should be encouraged to go back to their jobs, drawing concern from trade union groups. Men in low-skilled occupations suffered 21.4 COVID-19-related deaths per 100,000, more than double the average for working-age males of just under 10 deaths per 100,000, the Office for National Statistics said.

COVID-19 is the respiratory disease caused by the new coronavirus. Male security guards had a death rate of more than four times the overall average for working-age men. Male chefs, taxi drivers, chauffeurs and bus and coach drivers and also had higher death rates, contrasting with men classed as having professional occupations - which typically require a university education - whose mortality rates involving COVID-19 was 5.6.

Care workers and home carers - some of whom have raised concerns publicly about a lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) - had significantly raised rates of 23.4 for men per 100,000 COVID-19-related deaths. The rate for female care workers was 9.6, above the average death rate for working age women overall of 5.2 per 100,000. But healthcare workers, including doctors and nurses, who generally have more access to PPE, were not found to have higher rates of COVID-19-related deaths than people of the same age and sex in the general population.

"This suggests that PPE is working, or that by the time patients are ill enough to be admitted to hospital, often after over a week, they may be less infectious, or a combination of both factors," Keith Neal, an epidemiology professor at the University of Nottingham, said. Michael Head, a senior research fellow in global health at the University of Southampton, said guidance from the government for safe working, due to be published later on Monday, had to provide detail on how workers could be protected. "Employers and employees need that reassurance," he said. — Reuters

## 'Wear face coverings', Britain says; confusion surrounds lockdown

LONDON: Prime Minister Boris Johnson set out a cautious plan on Monday to get Britain back to work, including advice on wearing home-made face coverings, though his attempt to lift the coronavirus lockdown prompted confusion and even satire. The United Kingdom has one of the world's highest official COVID-19 death tolls and, after criticism that he was slow to impose a lockdown, Johnson is wary of triggering a second wave of infection.

"Our challenge now is to find a way forward that preserves our hard-won gains while easing the burden of lockdown," he told the House of Commons. "This is a supremely difficult balance." Opposition Labor Party leader Keir Starmer said the government had been issuing conflicting guidance that did not answer the public's practical questions about going back to work. "What the country needs at this time is clarity and reassurance, but at the moment both are in pretty short supply," he said.

Having refused for several weeks to give any indication of how it planned to start relaxing the lockdown, the government opted for a gradual release of information over 24 hours, starting with a solemn televised address by Johnson on Sunday. On Monday, the government published a 51-page document entitled "Our Plan to Rebuild: The UK Government's COVID-19 recovery strategy", followed by a series of sector-by-sector documents offering guidance to employers and workers. — Reuters