

International

'Total' lockdown for Chile capital after virus spike

Chile also has Latin America's highest rate of coronavirus testing

SANTIAGO: Chile ordered a mandatory total quarantine for the capital Santiago's seven million people Wednesday after authorities reported a 60 percent spike in coronavirus infections in 24 hours, dealing a stunning blow to hopes the economy would soon reopen.

"The most severe measure I must announce is a total quarantine in Greater Santiago," the location of 80 percent of the country's 34,000-plus confirmed cases, Health Minister Jaime Manalich said.

Manalich said the lockdown — including in several areas where earlier confinement measures had been lifted — was necessary after 2,260 new infections and 12 deaths in the last 24 hours.

The announcement follows a government request to the IMF for a flexible line of credit amounting to around \$23.8 billion for the next two years.

The credit line would help kickstart the economy after months of mass protests against the government of President Sebastian Pinera, a bodyblow to state revenues exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic.

'Battle of Santiago'

The lockdown — which come into force on Friday at 10:00 pm (0200 GMT Saturday) — means that people will be allowed to leave their homes only for essential reasons like buying food or medicine.

Chile had until now opted for a selective

quarantine strategy in dealing with the pandemic. Curfews were imposed in Santiago and other cities, but quarantines were limited to areas with high incidences of infection.

Chile also has Latin America's highest rate of coronavirus testing — 14,000 a day and around 200,000 overall.

However, the government had been increasingly concerned about rising infection numbers across the city of seven million people in the past 10 days, and last week ordered strict new confinement measures in three densely populated areas.

Health workers reported growing rates of infection in early May, just after the conservative government celebrated the fact that infections had "peaked," citing a persistent daily rate of around 500 new cases.

Within a few days, however, officials began to speak of "The Battle of Santiago."

"The month of May is being hard on our country and we have to take appropriate actions at the right time to stop this disease," Manalich said.

He added that the health system was able to cope, as deaths remain low, with 347 from COVID-19 since March 3.

Health authorities said the South American country had 553 ventilators available as of Wednesday, and more units would be added in the coming days.

The minister also announced that the government was imposing a mandatory quarantine on



SANTIAGO: A police member check two passers-by at Plaza de Armas square, in Santiago, after the government ordered a mandatory total quarantine due to the COVID-19 pandemic. —AFP

people over 75 years of age in the northern cities of Iquique and Alto Hospicio.

The government responded quickly to the first cases on March 3, introducing a nationwide cur-

few and selective quarantines on areas with high incidences of the virus. Schools, universities and businesses were closed as part of social distancing measures and transport restricted. —AFP

Washington mayor extends lockdown

WASHINGTON: Washington's mayor extended the US capital's lockdown Wednesday amid a stream of new coronavirus cases, even as many parts of the country gradually reopen in a push to prevent further economic damage.

The orders extend the city's home sheltering regime, which was set to expire today, to June 8, and came as similar measures were granted for the city's suburbs in the states of Maryland and Virginia. The two states are gradually reopening their economies, but have permitted communities near the capital — population: 700,000 — to open under different timelines, due to heightened levels of COVID-19.

"The number of new daily cases of COVID-19 diagnoses has yet to fall and the number of daily deaths has failed to decline," Mayor Muriel Bowser said in her proclamation.

"Community transmission of COVID-19 remains widespread throughout the district," she said, as well as "in the Maryland and Virginia areas near Washington."

The capital alone has seen 6,584 cases and 350 deaths, numbers that do not take into account statistics from the vast, surrounding suburbs. The capital's steady infection

rate comes as some cities, such as New York, the nation's coronavirus epicenter, have seen a decline in cases, and as a patchwork of states have reopened business to varying degrees.

In her orders, Bowser said that "the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths are below previous projections. Still, the district has not yet met the criteria for reopenings."

On Monday, the Washington mayor inaugurated a 437-bed temporary hospital at the city's Walter E. Washington Convention Center, adding that she hoped "we never get to the point of needing to use this site. Maryland's Republican Governor Larry Hogan, meanwhile announced a lift to the state's stay-at-home orders as of Friday.

But, he told reporters that "we fully understand that not all counties are in the same situation." Two of the counties directly outside the district, Prince George's and Montgomery, had indicated they were not ready to reopen, he said. The state of Virginia, to the south of Washington, will begin a limited reopening on Friday as well, according to Governor Ralph Northam.

However the area surrounding Washington was excluded from the plan, and given a two-week delay. Americans across the country have staged anti-lockdown demonstrations and President Donald Trump has pressed for rapid steps to rekindle the devastated US economy before a November election. —AFP

Maduro claims Guaido planned Venezuela 'invasion'

CARACAS: Venezuela President Nicolas Maduro alleged Wednesday that opposition leader Juan Guaido met with a former member of the US Army special forces at the White House to plan a failed sea invasion of the Caribbean country.

Maduro claimed the meeting occurred when Guaido, the legislative leader who is supported by the US and around fifty other countries as the interim president of Venezuela, visited the US president in Washington in February.

"It was at the White House on February 4 of this year, 2020, that Juan Guaido met with Jordan Goudreau" the leftist leader said, referring to the former special forces member who Venezuela has alleged organized and trained a mercenary force to carry out the invasion. The meeting, Maduro said, was "at the order of Donald Trump to come up with the plan of attack." According to Maduro, "it would be very easy to verify" Goudreau's presence at the White House between 2019 and 2020 and "in which room he met with Mr Guaido." —AFP