

## International

# Ecuador capital braces for worsening spread of virus

## Cemeteries run out of space; Guayaquil stabilizes

**QUITO:** As the coronavirus outbreak in Ecuador's largest city of Guayaquil begins to stabilize, the government is bracing for worsening spread in the highland capital Quito, where at least six people have died in the streets in the past month. Guayaquil was at the center of one of Latin America's worst outbreaks of the novel coronavirus in March and April. Cemeteries ran out of space and families stored relatives' dead bodies in their homes or on the streets as the virus strained the health system's capacity to collect them.

But authorities' attention is now turning to Quito, whose 2.8 million residents are under a strict lockdown to contain the virus' spread. The local government said in a statement on Friday that between April 4 and May 13 it had picked up the bodies of six people who had died in the streets, in addition to seven bodies from homes and two from nursing homes. The government said on Thursday night that 135 of the 164 intensive care beds in the city's public hospitals are occupied, and that it plans to install some 80 more. "Quito's health system is reaching its limit," the city's mayor, Jorge Yunda, said on Friday during the opening of a temporary 380-bed hospital for

coronavirus patients.

Pichincha province, where Quito is located, has registered some 2,400 coronavirus cases and 181 deaths. That is still fewer than southern Guayas province, where Guayaquil is located, where 55% of the country's 31,467 total cases have been registered.

But the deaths in the streets have caused alarm. On May 3 a 60-year-old merchant who had been diagnosed with COVID-19, the respiratory disease caused by the coronavirus, collapsed and died after walking just a few meters on the street, Yunda told local media last week.

Despite the strict lockdown in Quito, informal salesmen seeking income to subsist have continued to cluster in many parts of the city. The government has extended the lockdown through May 31, and is implementing a web-based system to help residents locate the nearest place to seek medical attention. Authorities also said they will be working together with funeral homes to avoid delays in cremating bodies. "We have taken all the necessary measures, and we have a plan to deal with deaths at homes and at hospitals," Sebastian Barona, the coordinator of an industry group representing Ecuador's funeral homes said. — Reuters



### Residents under strict lockdown



**QUITO:** An Ecuadorian criminalistics police member verifies the death of a woman who died of unknown causes in a street of Quito amid the new coronavirus pandemic. — AFP

## First virus death in Nepal - a new mother

**KATHMANDU:** Nepal reported its first coronavirus death late Saturday - a 29-year-old woman who recently gave birth - as the total number of people infected in the country reached 281. The victim - who was from Sindhupalchowk district, some 90 kilometers (about 55 miles) from the capital Kathmandu - was on her way to a hospital for treatment when she died.

"It has been proven that is this the first case of death caused by COVID-19 in Nepal," the deputy spokesman for the health ministry, Samir Kumar Adhikari, said in a statement. The woman gave birth at a hospital in Kathmandu on May 6 and then returned to her home district a day later. She was treated at a local hospital after suffering from fever and respiratory problems. When her condition worsened, she was referred to another hospital. Her newborn and other family members will be tested to see if they have contracted the virus, local media reported.

Nepal, which has a population of 28 million, has



**KATHMANDU:** People stand in queues as they wait to be tested for a coronavirus test at Kalimati vegetable market during a government-imposed nationwide lockdown as a preventive measure against the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus. — AFP

conducted fewer than 100,000 tests so far. Experts say the lack of mass testing may have prevented identification of other fatalities. "I don't think this is the first death. There have been cases of deaths where similar symptoms were seen, but the cause was unclear," said epidemiologist Lhamo

Sherpa. "There needs to be more tests, contact tracing... and more transparency." In January, Nepal was the first south Asian country to report a case of coronavirus. The country has been under lockdown since March 24 after a second case was confirmed. — AFP

## Nigerian leader gets Madagascar's virus potion; WHO warns

**ABUJA:** Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari on Saturday received samples of a herbal concoction that Madagascar claims can cure people infected with the new coronavirus, his office said. Buhari who collected the potion from President Umaro Sissoco Embalo of Guinea Bissau who visited him in Abuja said the native remedy would be scientifically tested before use. "We have our institutions, systems and processes in the country. Any such formulations should be sent to them for verification," he said. "I will not put it to use without the endorsement of our institutions," he added. The virus has so far infected 5,445 people and claimed 171 lives in Africa's most populous nation of 200 million inhabitants. Several other African nations have also expressed interest in the purported remedy, which is known as Covid-Organics.

The drink is derived from artemisia - a plant with proven efficacy in malaria treatment - and other indigenous herbs. But the World Health Organization has warned against "adopting a product that has not been taken through tests to see its efficacy", and the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention has also said it should be "tested rigorously". Madagascar leader Andry Rajoelina on Monday dismissed criticisms against the herbal concoction, saying the West was against it because it was discovered in Africa. Madagascar's official body in charge of drug control has not approved the drink for sale in the country.

### WHO cautions

Meanwhile, the World Health Organization on Thursday advised governments to clinically test a herbal drink touted by Madagascar's President Andry Rajoelina as a remedy against coronavirus. The Covid-Organics infusion is derived from artemisia - a plant with proven anti-malarial properties - and other indigenous herbs. Rajoelina hopes to distribute the infusion across West Africa and beyond, claiming it cures COVID-19 patients within 10 days.

Equatorial Guinea, Guinea-Bissau and Niger have already received consignments of the potion. Others such as Tanzania have expressed interest. But the World Health Organization (WHO) has repeatedly warned that there are no published scientific studies of the herbal tea and that its effects have not been tested. "We would caution and advise countries against adopting a product that has not been taken through tests to see its efficacy," WHO Africa Director Matshidiso Moeti said in a press briefing on Thursday, calling on Madagascar to take the drink "through a clinical trial".

Moeti said that in 2000, African governments had committed to taking "traditional therapies" through the same clinical trials as other medication. "I can understand the need, the drive to find something that can help," Moeti said. "But we would very much like to encourage this scientific process in which the governments themselves made a commitment." Rajoelina defended his tonic during a coronavirus screening campaign in Madagascar's eastern city of Toamasina on Thursday. "The WHO has indicated that artemisia could lead to a cure for coronavirus," the president said, promising to submit the drink to clinical trials. Earlier this week, the WHO recognised artemisia as a "possible treatment" for COVID-19. But the organization also repeated its calls for more rigorous testing. South Africa's Health Minister Zweli Mkhize on Wednesday said Madagascar had reached out for "help" with scientific research. — Agencies

## Trauma endures of South Korea's Gwangju Uprising

**GWANGJU:** It is 40 years since Choi Jung-ja saw her husband, who has been missing since South Korea's military dictatorship killed hundreds of people when they crushed the pro-democracy Gwangju Uprising, a scar that burns in the country's political psyche to this day. On May 18, 1980 demonstrators protesting against dictator Chun Doo-hwan's declaration of martial law confronted his troops and 10 days of violence ensued. But conservatives in the South still condemn the uprising as a Communist-inspired rebellion backed by the North, while left-leaning President Moon Jae-in wants to enshrine it in the constitution.

Choi's husband was 43 when he left their house in the southern city to buy oil for a heater at the family pub, never to return. Once the violence was over Choi frantically searched for him, even opening random coffins in the streets covered with blood-stained Korean flags. "I couldn't continue after opening the third coffin," she told AFP. "The faces were covered with blood - there were no words to describe them. The faces were unrecognizable." She still takes medication to deal with the trauma, she said, and curses whenever Chun appears on television.

### 'Fuel for the fire'

There is no agreed toll for Gwangju, with reports of secret burials both on land and at sea. The military remaining in power for another eight years offered ample opportunity to dispose of the evidence. Official bodies point to around 160 dead - including some soldiers and police - and more than 70 missing. Activists say up to three times as many may have been killed. But the search for justice has gone through multiple twists and turns and Gwangju is one of the most politicized historical events in a viciously polarised country. The South is still technically at war with the nuclear-armed North. At the time of the Gwangju Uprising, Chun's military regime described it as a rebellion led by supporters of then-opposition leader Kim Dae-jung, who comes from nearby Sinan, and pro-Pyongyang agitators. Kim was arrested, convicted of sedition and sentenced to death. But the penalty was commuted under international pressure and he was granted asylum in the US, before being elected president himself in the 1990s after the restoration of democracy and winning the 2000 Nobel Peace Prize. — AFP



**Fighters loyal to Yemen's Southern Transitional Council (STC) separatists stand in the back of a pick-up truck, bearing the portrait of STC Chief Aidarus Al-Zubaidi, at the frontline during clashes with pro-government forces for control of Zinjibar, the capital of the southern Abyan province. — AFP**

## 14 dead in sixth day of fighting in south Yemen

**ADEN:** Fourteen combatants died in Yemen on Saturday, as fighting between pro-government troops and separatist forces entered a sixth day in the southern province of Abyan, according to sources on both sides. Separatist forces of the Southern Transitional Council (STC) are resisting an offensive by pro-government troops launched on the outskirts of Zinjibar, some 60 kilometers from the main southern city of Aden. "Fourteen fighters, including ten pro-government soldiers, were killed on Saturday," a government military official told AFP on condition of anonymity. The toll was confirmed by a separatist military source, who also claimed the capture of "40 pro-government soldiers and the seizure of military equipment".

"They (pro-government soldiers) were unable to

advance toward Zinjibar and they will only get there over our dead bodies," a separatist commander on the front line told AFP. The offensive was being carried out by the military wing of the Islamist party Al-Islah - allied to the government - according to several sources. The fighting is the first major confrontation since the separatists declared self-rule in southern Yemen on 26 April, accusing the government of failing to carry out its duties and of "conspiring" against their cause. At least ten fighters were killed and many were wounded on both sides in fighting on Monday.

The clashes complicate Yemen's war between the government - backed by a Saudi-led military coalition - and Iran-backed Houthi rebels who control much of the north, including the capital Sanaa. The government and the STC have technically been allies in the long war against the Houthis. But the separatists in the south, which used to be an independent country, have agitated to break away again - a campaign that was temporarily put to rest with a power-sharing deal signed in Riyadh last November. Over the past six years, the Yemen conflict has killed tens of thousands of people, mostly civilians, and triggered what the United Nations considers to be the world's worst humanitarian crisis. — AFP