



Thousands flee as powerful cyclone buffets south India

Backlash in Indonesia as transgender woman put in male jail cell



LIMA: Relatives carry the coffin of a suspected COVID-19 victim at the Nueva Esperanza cemetery, one of the largest in Latin America, in the southern outskirts of Lima. — AFP

Global virus cases pass 60 million

Sombre Thanksgiving in US as COVID death toll mounts

WASHINGTON: Americans readied for a subdued Thanksgiving holiday yesterday under the pall of a worsening coronavirus crisis, with death tolls hitting new highs worldwide as infections multiply to surpass more than 60 million. While vaccine breakthroughs have raised hopes for an end to the pandemic, much of the world is still facing a gloomy winter holiday season dampened by lockdowns, economic anxiety and the devastating losses of from a disease that is claiming thousands of lives daily.

In the United States, Americans suffered their highest daily death toll in six months on the eve of the Thanksgiving holiday, a time when families normally gather in large numbers for decadent feasts of turkey, mashed potatoes and pie. It is also tradition to serve hot meals to the needy, a service provided by food banks and homeless shelters that have become especially vital in a year when the pandemic has wiped out jobs and incomes.

"After weeks and months of the COVID and all these issues of unemployment, it's nice to feel a sense of belonging," said Samitha Antwi, a woman who picked up a packaged meal distributed by the Los Angeles Mission ahead of Thanksgiving. "A hot meal, it warms your heart. We call it, in my community, soul food," added Linn Hohl, another woman in line. The US government's health protection agency has for the first time called on Americans not to travel for the holiday - a call that not all have heeded.

In his Thanksgiving address on Wednesday, US President-elect Joe Biden also appealed for his "weary" countrymen to dig deep and soldier through the remaining months until vaccines are available. "There is real hope, tangible hope. So hang on. Don't let yourself surrender to the fatigue," Biden urged. More than 60 million infections and 1.4 million deaths have now been recorded around the world since the new coronavirus emerged in China late last year, according to a tally compiled by AFP from official sources.

The number of infections - roughly equivalent to the population of Italy - likely only reflects a fraction of the actual total, as many countries lack testing capacity. While low-income frontline workers often face the biggest risks, the virus has also infected the world's wealthiest and most powerful. Yesterday, Sweden's Prince Carl Philip and his wife Princess Sofia became the latest royalty to go into self-isolation after testing positive for COVID-19, the palace said.

Ski season cancelled?

In Europe, where many countries have imposed sweeping shutdowns in recent weeks, ski holidays were fast becoming the latest victims of the pandemic. Germany said Wednesday that it would extend its virus curbs until 2021 and plans to seek a deal with European partners to close ski slopes until January 10.

Infected tourists at European ski resorts were a major source of virus spread around the hard-hit continent earlier this year. The statement from Chancellor Angela Merkel dovetailed with French plans announced one day earlier to shutter ski resorts through the year's end. "I will say this openly that it won't be easy, but we will try," Merkel said.

The move put Berlin and Paris on a collision course with resort operators and holiday hotspot Austria ahead of the crucial Christmas season. In non-EU member Switzerland, however, ski resorts are open - although police have been spotted patrolling to ensure that skiers respect anti-COVID measures such as wearing masks and social distancing. While the UK and France are talking about easing their lockdown measures soon, Russia is still resisting stay-at-home orders despite registering record infections and deaths from the virus.

In the poor Balkan region, soaring rates of infection are stretching already weak healthcare systems, but governments are hesitant to inflict any further economic damage with harsh measures. Countries who have had strong success against the virus are also cracking down on new outbreaks. South Korea closed bars and nightclubs this week as it braces for a third major wave, with virus cases at their highest level since March. And New Zealand was tackling a cluster of six COVID-19 positive players of Pakistan's visiting cricket squad. — AFP