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LONDON: Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson leaves 10 Downing Street in central London yesterday to make a statement to MPs in Parliament on the COVID-19 pandemic. The British government will announce fresh steps to try and stop a coronavirus surge in England, while the United States was on the verge of 200,000 Covid-19 deaths. — AFP

Britain to impose new virus curbs as US crosses over 200,000 deaths

Pandemic is showing no signs of slowing down

LONDON: The British government will announce fresh steps today to try and stop a coronavirus surge in England, while the United States crossed over 200,000 Covid-19 deaths. The pandemic is showing no signs of slowing down — more than 31.2 million infections have been detected worldwide, with 964,000 deaths — and nations are scrambling to contain new outbreaks.

The ramped-up response in Britain follows warnings that the country could see up to 50,000 cases a day by mid-October, and a month later exceed 200 deaths every day. France and Spain are battling similar surges.

"If we don't do enough, the virus will take off and at the moment that is the path that we are clearly on," said Chris Whitty, the British government's chief medical officer. "And if we do not change course, then we are going to find ourselves in a very difficult problem."

Under new rules to come into force on Thursday, English pubs, bars and other hospitality venues will be

required to close at 10 pm. Food and drink outlets will also be restricted to table service only. Many nations in Europe were easing restrictions after largely overcoming initial outbreaks, but the resurgence of the virus has forced them to tighten curbs again. In the Czech Republic, Prime Minister Andrej Babis admitted Monday that the government had loosened restrictions too quickly. "Even I got carried away by the coming summer and the general mood," he said. "That was a mistake I don't want to make again."

'Lies and incompetence'

The number of deaths in the United States was crossed over 200,000 yesterday, with infections in the worst-hit nation in the world approaching seven million. Overall, the US accounts for four percent of the world's population and 20 percent of its coronavirus deaths.

President Donald Trump has faced intense criticism of his handling of the crisis ahead of the November

election. "Due to Donald Trump's lies and incompetence in the past six months, (we) have seen one of the gravest losses of American life in history," his Democratic rival Joe Biden charged on Monday.

"With this crisis, a real crisis, a crisis that required serious presidential leadership, he just wasn't up to it. He froze. He failed to act. He panicked. And America has paid the worst price of any nation in the world."

Trump insisted Monday that the United States was "rounding the corner with or without a vaccine".

But US Federal Reserve boss Jerome Powell will warn Tuesday in testimony before a Congressional committee that a full recovery in the world's biggest economy "is likely to come only when people are confident that it is safe to reengage in a broad range of activities", according to prepared remarks.

'I'll never return'

A vaccine is considered crucial to ending the pan-

dem — with multiple development efforts underway around the world — but there are concerns that the poorest nations may not be able to access it.

More than 60 wealthy nations — but not China and the United States — have joined a program backed by the World Health Organization to facilitate poor countries' access to vaccines, according to a list published Monday. Until one is available, the options for treatment available to the less privileged are limited. In Mexico, where more than 73,000 people have died, many are choosing to stay at home when they fall ill instead of seeking treatment at creaking public hospitals. Jessica Castillo in Hidalgo state said she suffered for a week at home, and even had suicidal thoughts.

"I felt that the air I was breathing wasn't entering my lungs," said 43-year-old pastry chef, whose coronavirus recovery took more than a month. "But I said: 'If I go to hospital, I'll never return.'" — AFP

Abu Dhabi abolishes permit system for buying alcohol

ABU DHABI: Authorities in the UAE capital Abu Dhabi have abolished the requirement for permits to purchase and consume alcohol, according to an official circular, after neighbouring Dubai also moved to relax rules. The changes come as both the emirates, among seven in the United Arab Emirates federation, seek to rebuild their tourism industries after the coronavirus shutdown, and also prepare for visitors from Israel after a landmark deal to normalise relations.

"We are announcing the cancellation of permits for alcohol, and residents and tourists will have the right to buy it in authorised stores," said the circular from the Department of Culture and Tourism dated September 15 and seen by AFP yesterday.

The directive said buyers must be at least 21 years of age, that the alcohol must not be re-sold, and that it should be consumed in a private home or an authorised place such as a club. But it did not specify whether Muslims are forbidden to buy alcohol or not. Formerly Muslims were not permitted to acquire an alcohol licence. The circular ends a legal grey area in the emirate. Although liquor stores in Abu Dhabi do not usually ask for permits to sell alcohol, sales were technically still subject to those rules. In Dubai, stores are required to ask residents or tourists to show a permit before selling alcohol, but bars and restaurants do not require patrons to produce the document.

This year, Dubai also relaxed the permit system, making it easier for residents to acquire one by removing the requirement to obtain a "certificate of no objection" from their employer.

Residents need only to fill out a basic form, present their identity card, and pay 270 dirhams (\$74) to obtain the permit. Tourists can get a temporary licence by showing their passport and visas at the store.

However, Muslims still cannot apply for an alcohol permit in Dubai. The sale of alcohol is permitted in six of the seven emirates in the UAE, but is prohibited in conservative Sharjah which remains "dry" with no pubs or bars. Public intoxication and drink-driving are strictly banned across the country. — AFP

NZ's Ardern seen cruising to victory in election

WELLINGTON: New Zealand's ruling Labour Party has lost some support since July as the coronavirus resurged in Auckland, but it is still set to win the upcoming general election on Oct 17 comfortably, an opinion poll showed on Tuesday. The 1News-Colmar Brunton poll showed support for Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's party, which is seeking a second term in office, at 48%, down 5 percentage points since the last poll in late July.

The opposition National party also lost 1 percentage point taking it to 31%, under newly elected leader Judith Collins. The results mean Labour would get 62 seats, and can govern alone without any coalition.

Small parties like the Green Party got 6% support while the ACT New Zealand surprised with 7% support. But populist New Zealand First Party, a kingmaker in the last election, dropped to 2%, which means it would not get into parliament if it does not win an electorate seat. All recent polls have pointed to a comfortable victory for Ardern, who has won global praise for her leadership during the coronavirus pandemic. Ardern and Collins will face each other in the first live TV debate for the election later yesterday.

Ardern has called it a 'COVID election' and focused her campaign on highlighting the government's success in tackling the health and economic challenges thrown up by the pandemic.

The 40-year-old, who became the world's youngest female leader after unexpectedly winning power in 2017, holds huge appeal domestically and globally where she has garnered praise for her views on issues such as women's rights, climate change and diversity. — Reuters

US Supreme Court vacancy upends presidential race

MONROE: Supreme Court justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's death has roiled the US presidential race, with the battle over her replacement looming large in swing states likely to determine the course of an election just six weeks from today.

Many Republicans see her passing as a golden if controversial opportunity for President Donald Trump to pick another conservative — his third — for a life-long spot on the nine-member bench.

Michelle Burns, a stay-at-home mother of six in the small city of Monroe, in southern Michigan, said "it's God's will" that Trump fill the court vacancy before the vote. "My own belief is that this was a divine intervention," the 46-year-old told AFP Monday outside her home that features over-the-top Halloween decorations complete with an inflatable Trump.

"What's the coincidence of it happening seven weeks before the election?" Trump's battle with Democrat Joe Biden is on a razor's edge, with the Ginsburg replacement the latest in a series of bitterly divisive election issues: Trump's handling of the coronavirus pandemic, the resulting economic downturn, and tensions over racial injustice. Whether the explosive Ginsburg issue fundamentally alters the race is not yet known. But grassroots Democrats hope Trump nominating a replacement would be met with a backlash that tilts the presidential contest their way in critical Industrial Belt states like Michigan and Ohio.

"It's really life or death at this point," said 21-year-old college student Alexa Cooley, as she and her sister left a Democratic Party office in Monroe with campaign yard signs under their arms.

While she acknowledges the court seat battle is a rallying point for pro-life voters like Burns, Cooley sees a five-alarm fire that will "motivate Democrats" to vote for Biden on November 3. "Especially with Ruth Bader Ginsburg, we could go to Gilead," Cooley said, referring to the patriarchal theocracy in the dystopian novel "The Handmaid's Tale."

"A lot of my friends are talking about, 'our lives are going to be the Handmaid's Tale, all our rights are

going to be taken away'" if a conservative majority court strikes down landmark cases protecting women's rights, she said. "That's what women my age are concerned about." Monroe County was one of several in Michigan that voted twice for Barack Obama but flipped to Trump, helping him narrowly carry the state and propel him to a 2016 shock win. Monroe resident James Pocock believes Biden will have to fight hard to win back the county, and said the Supreme Court battle will only intensify the drama. "I feel like it's going to cause a lot of conflict," the 21-year-old said.

Pocock is Republican and comes from a pro-life family, so there is pressure to fall in line and back the president. But he believes Trump has done "questionable things in office" and has badly mishandled the coronavirus, and so Pocock's vote, he said, is going to Biden, despite Pocock's own opposition to abortion.

'Fill that seat!'

Trump has announced he will nominate a new justice soon and the Senate's Republican leader said to expect a confirmation vote. The move so close to an election has infuriated Democrats. But in neighboring northwestern Ohio, a closely watched bellwether state won by Trump in 2016, supporters streamed into Trump's Monday open-air rally eager for the president to fulfill his duty.

"It's really important for President Trump to push through another nominee for the Supreme Court (who) believes in life, who believes in the constitution, believes in liberty," said realtor Holly Orman of Toledo as she entered the rally in nearby Swanton.

Orman, 44 and wearing a T-shirt that read "Jesus is my savior, Trump is my president," said the economy was paramount in 2020 but that the court vacancy was vital too, and that Democrats "should back off and let (Trump) do his job." Most rally attendees appeared unconcerned about the Supreme Court showdown having a damaging effect on Trump's re-election effort.

"He's rushing it, and I think he should," Paula Nowicki, wearing a pink "Women for Trump" hat, said of the president's planned nomination.

Her 30-year-old daughter Becky Nowicki, an insurance producer, is a fervent Trump supporter but broke with her mother when asked if she felt the issue could turn the election against him. "Honestly I feel like we could see anything in 2020 so I think it could — which is terrifying," she said. Trump appeared to relish the opportunity to discuss the vacancy with his pumped-up fans. — AFP