

China Warns Deadly Virus Can Mutate, Spread



A staff member wearing a mask monitors thermal scanners that detect temperatures of passengers at the security check inside the Hankou Railway Station in Wuhan, Hubei province, China January 21, 2020.

BEIJING (AFP) -- A new virus that has killed nine people, infected hundreds and reached the United States could mutate and spread, China warned Wednesday, as authorities urged people to steer clear of the city at the heart of the outbreak.

The coronavirus has caused alarm because of its similarity to SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome), which killed nearly 650 people across mainland China and Hong Kong in 2002-2003.

With hundreds of millions of people travelling across China this week for the Lunar New Year holiday, the National Health Commission announced measures to contain the disease -- including

sterilization and ventilation at airports and bus stations, as well as inside planes and trains.

In Wuhan, the epicenter of the epidemic, large public events were cancelled and international football matches were moved to new location. Visitors were urged to stay away, while residents were advised to not leave the central city of 11 million people.

The illness is mainly transmitted via the respiratory tract and there "is the possibility of viral mutation and further spread of the disease", health commission vice minister Li Bin told a news conference in Beijing.

The virus has now infected at least 440

people across the country, with most cases in Wuhan. Li added that 1,394 people are still under medical observation.

The World Health Organization (WHO) started an emergency meeting Wednesday to determine whether to declare a rare global public health emergency over the disease, which has now been detected in the United States, Taiwan, Thailand, Japan, South Korea and Macau.

The first case in the United States -- a Seattle resident in his 30s -- is in good condition, American officials said.

The Chinese government has classified the outbreak in the same category as the SARS epidemic, meaning compulsory isolation for those diagnosed with the illness and the potential to implement quarantine measures.

But they still have not been able to confirm the exact source of the virus.

"We will step up research efforts to identify the source and transmission of the disease," Li said, although he said experts believe "the cases are mostly linked to Wuhan".

Countries have been intensifying efforts to stop the spread of the pathogen -- known by its technical name 2019 Novel Coronavirus -- as the number of cases jumped.

Plane passengers are facing screening measures at five US airports and a host of transport hubs across Asia.

North Korea will ban foreign tourists entirely to protect itself against the virus, according to a major tour operator.

Lawmakers Elect Greece's First Female President



Incoming President of Hellenic Republic, Katerina Sakellariou, waits for Greek Parliament Speaker Konstantinos Tasoulas to announce the results of a parliamentary vote for the election of the new President, in Athens, January 22, 2020.

ATHENS, Greece (AP) — Greece's lawmakers elected their country's first female president Wednesday, with an overwhelming majority voting in favor of high court judge Katerina Sakellariou.

Speaking after being formally informed of the parliamentary vote, Sakellariou said she would aim for the "broadest possible consensus" in the course of carrying out her duties.

In her first comments as president-elect, the judge noted the "difficult conditions and challenges of the 21st century, including the financial crisis, climate change, the mass movement of populations and the consequent humanitarian crisis, the erosion of the rule of law and all manner of inequalities and exclusions."

Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis nominated Sakellariou as a non-partisan candidate who would enjoy broad support from across the political spectrum. All major parties voted in favor of the nomination, with Sakellariou being elected to the largely ceremonial post in a 261-33 vote, well above the 200 votes required. Six lawmakers were absent.

Greece has a historically low number of women in senior positions in politics, and Mitsotakis had been

criticized for selecting a nearly all-male Cabinet after he won general elections in July 2019. In the current Greek Cabinet, all but one of the 18 senior positions are held by men.

Speaking after the vote, Mitsotakis described Sakellariou, 63, as a "great jurist, a great judiciary personality who unites all Greeks from the minute this procedure began."

He said he sought to nominate a candidate who would "symbolize the youth of the Greek nation, and I am glad that the result confirmed that on the big issues, we can finally agree."

European officials congratulated Sakellariou, with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen welcoming the election of Greece's first female president in a tweet that said the country was "moving ahead into a new era of equality."

Sakellariou, who has headed the Council of State, the country's highest administrative court, since 2018, is to begin her five-year term in March, when the term of the current president, veteran conservative politician Prokopis Pavlopoulos, expires.

News in Brief

LONDON (AFP) -- The death toll in British prisons is "a national scandal", a pressure group said on Wednesday, calling for a reduction in inmate numbers just as the government is promising tougher sentences. Inquest, which probes state-related deaths, said in a new report that there were six deaths and nearly two suicides every week inside British jails last year. It called the rate "shocking and unacceptable", noting many fatalities were found to be preventable, and criticized record levels of distress and self-harm within the system. The charity said Prime Minister Boris Johnson should make "a substantial reduction in the prison population" and invest instead in health and community-based alternatives to jail. Johnson and his Conservative party won a comfortable parliamentary majority at elections in December on a manifesto that included vowing to be tougher on crime.

WASHINGTON (Reuters) -- The Trump administration is planning to add seven countries -- Belarus, Eritrea, Kyrgyzstan, Myanmar, Nigeria, Sudan and Tanzania -- to its travel ban list, U.S. media reports said on Tuesday. Some countries will face bans only on some visa categories, the Wall Street Journal reported. The list of countries was not final and could yet change, website Politico said. U.S. President Donald Trump said in an interview with the Journal that he was considering adding countries to the travel ban, but declined to state which ones. Politico said an announcement was expected as early as Monday. The move is likely to sour ties between the United States and the countries affected under the expanded ban. Nigeria, for example, Africa's largest economy and most populous country, is a U.S. anti-terrorism partner and has a large diaspora residing in the United States.

DAVOS, Switzerland (Reuters) -- The world needs to prepare for millions of people being driven from their homes by the impact of climate change, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees said on Tuesday. Speaking to Reuters at the World Economic Forum, Filippo Grandi said a UN ruling this week meant those fleeing as a result of climate change deserved international protection, and that it had broad implications for governments. The UN Human Rights Committee made the landmark ruling on Monday in relation to Ioane Teitiota, from the Pacific nation of Kiribati, who brought a case against New Zealand after authorities denied his claim of asylum. "The ruling says if you have an immediate threat to your life due to climate change, due to the climate emergency, and if you cross the border and go to another country, you should not be sent back, because you would be at risk of your life, just like in a war or in a situation of persecution," Grandi said.

CARACAS (AFP) -- Agents from Venezuela's Sebin intelligence service have raided the offices of opposition leader Juan Guaido while he is traveling in Europe, an opposition lawmaker said. The opposition said one of their lawmakers, Ismael Leon, was also arrested Tuesday on his way to the National Assembly. However, in a series of tweets around midnight, the minister of communication and information denied Sebin officials had targeted the private office of the opposition leader, saying it was an operation against two businessmen for money laundering. The tower where the offices are located had been surrounded in the afternoon by hooded and armed Sebin officers dressed in black. The offices were empty when the search began, the opposition said, adding that several lawmakers had been unable to gain access.

PRISTINA (Reuters) -- A Kosovo court jailed eight men on Wednesday for the attempted murder of a former politician and plotting to kill the Balkan country's president and prime minister in 2017. The eight received jail terms ranging from two to 12 years and were part of an organization known as People's Eye which President Hashim Thaci and the court have described as a terrorist organization. One of the eight, Murat Jashari, received a 10-year sentence for shooting at and wounding former politician and prominent lawyer Azem Vllasi on the doorstep of his house in March 2017. The court said Vllasi was the first victim on a list of potential targets that included Thaci and Isa Mustafa, who was prime minister at the time. "Their aim was to seriously destabilize or destroy the political, economic, constitutional or social structures of the Republic of Kosovo," presiding judge Naime Krasniqi Jashanica said in the verdict.

ASUNCION (Reuters) -- A dengue fever outbreak that has affected thousands of Paraguayans in recent weeks has reached as far as the presidential palace, with the country's leader Mario Abdo costing as having been struck by the disease. The country's Health Minister Julio Mazzoleni told a press conference on Wednesday that the 48-year-old president fell unwell during a trip to the east of the country and returned to the capital Asuncion where the diagnosis was confirmed. He has been ordered to rest. The diagnosis underscores the potential severity of the outbreak of the disease in Paraguay, which has the second highest incidence of dengue in South America after Brazil. A severe outbreak in 2013 led to 250 deaths in the country.

Putin Keeps Key Ministers in New Administration



President Vladimir Putin stands before top politicians at his annual address to the Federal Assembly.

MOSCOW (AFP) -- Russian President Vladimir Putin appointed a new government on Tuesday, less than a week after he announced sweeping constitutional reforms and his longtime prime minister resigned.

Putin, who said there was a "demand for change" in his announcements last week, kept on key allies.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu -- both staunch Putin supporters and major policy figures -- held on to their positions, as well as the finance and energy ministers, Anton Siluanov and Alexander Novak.

But he replaced several officials in charge of social affairs, including the ministers of health, education, labor and economic development.

Meeting the cabinet of new Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin for the first time, Putin said its most important task was to "increase the welfare of our citizens and strengthen our state".

"I sincerely wish you success... it is in the interests of the entire country," Putin said during a televised meeting.

Mishustin said the cabinet would meet right away with a focus on boosting economic growth and "improving people's living standards".

The government of Putin's longtime ally Dmitry Medvedev resigned last week, a few hours after the president announced the constitutional reforms.

Medvedev was replaced the next day by Mishustin, the little-known head of Russia's tax service.

The reforms will transfer some authority to parliament, including the power to choose the prime minister, and beef up the role of an advisory body called the State Council, potentially headed by Putin.

Mishustin promised "real changes" as he was approved by parliament last week, echoing language Putin had used in his state of the nation address announcing the reforms.

Medvedev's approval rating collapsed in recent years as the economy stagnated and Russians saw a drop in their disposable income.

Putin has put forward a slew of plans to reboot the economy and improve living standards, including a series of "national projects" and increased payouts to families.

The national projects -- which include huge investments in infrastructure, the digital economy, education and health -- are expected to cost an estimated \$400 billion (360 billion euros) by 2024.

Mishustin, who had led Russia's Federal Tax Service since 2010, is seen as an effective and efficient administrator without his own political ambitions.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov on Tuesday insisted the Russian public will have a chance to evaluate them.

"There will be a mass discussion of the proposed amendments, a mass information campaign and discussion will be happening," he told journalists.

U.S. Parties Fiercely Clash as Trump Trial Opens

WASHINGTON (AFP) -- Republicans and Democrats battled over summoning high-level White House witnesses Tuesday in a marathon first day of arguments in President Donald Trump's trial for abuse of power.

The two sides squared off in fiery exchanges that circled around the procedures for the trial and gave the Democrats an opportunity to spell out their arguments for Trump's guilt on national television.

But Republican Senate leader Mitch McConnell flexed his own political muscle, mobilizing his side's 53-47 majority in the body to slap down Democratic attempts to amend the trial procedures that he reportedly crafted together with the White House and designed to protect Trump.

After 13 hours, just before 2 am, McConnell was successful in pushing back every Democratic effort, ensuring Republicans had control over a trial they hope will be wrapped up by the end of the month.

The president meanwhile monitored the challenge to his three-year-old presidency from the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

The case is "just a hoax," he said. "It's the witch hunt that's been going on for years and frankly it's disgraceful." McConnell's rules set out a schedule of six days of ar-

guments, three days by the House impeachment managers and then three days by Trump's defense team, to be followed by one day of questions from the 100 Senators, who sit as jury in the trial.

Democrats though were angered by McConnell's refusal to call witnesses and subpoena documents before the trial's arguments phase is over.

They want to hear from current and former top Trump aides, including White House Chief of Staff Mick Mulvaney and former national security advisor John Bolton.

Without any guarantee that witnesses would be called even at that time, they sought in a last-ditch move to give the presiding judge, Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts, the last word on calling witnesses.

That too was rejected in a stark party-line vote. "They don't want a fair trial," said Adam Schiff, the leader of the House impeachment managers prosecuting the case. "They don't want you to hear these witnesses... they don't want a neutral justice to weigh in."

But Schiff's team took advantage of the opportunity to seek amendments to occupy the television cameras for most of the hearing and lay out their case against the U.S. leader.