Spread of Deadly Virus Accelerates in China

Shoppers wearing face masks pay for their groceries at a supermarket in Wuhan in central China's Hubei province, Jan. 25, 2020.

BEIJING (AP) — **A new viral illness being watched with a wary eye around the globe accelerated its spread in China on Sunday with 56 deaths so far, while the U.S. Consulate in the city at the epicenter announced it will evacuate its personnel and some private citizens aboard a charter flight.**

China's health minister said the country was entering a "crucial stage" as "it seems like the ability of the virus to spread is getting stronger."

Ma Xiaowei declined to estimate how long it would take to bring the situation under control, but said travel restrictions and other strict measures should bring results "at the lowest cost and fastest speed."

President Xi Jinping on Saturday called the outbreak a grave situation and said the government was stepping up efforts to restrict travel and public gatherings while rushing medical staff and supplies to the city at the center of the crisis, Wuhan, which remains on lockdown with no flights, trains or buses in or out.

The epidemic has revived memories of the SARS outbreak that originated in China and killed nearly 800 as it spread around the world in 2002 and 2003. Its spread has come amid China's busiest travel period of the year, when millions crisscross the country or head abroad for the Lunar New Year holiday.

The latest figures reported Sunday morning cover the previous 24 hours and mark an increase of 15 deaths and 688 cases for a total of 1,975 infections.

The government also reported five cases in Hong Kong, two in Macao and three in Taiwan. Small numbers of cases have been found in Thailand, Japan, South Korea, the U.S., Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, Nepal, France and Australia.

The U.S. has confirmed cases in Washington state, Chicago, and most recently Southern California. The latest patient announced Saturday night traveled from Wuhan and is in isolation at a hospital and in good condition.

Canada said it discovered its first case, a man in his 50s who was in Wuhan before flying to Toronto. Singapore and South Korea each reported one new case Sunday, while Thailand reported three new cases.

A notice from the U.S. Embassy in Beijing said there would be limited capacity to transport U.S. citizens on a Tuesday flight from Wuhan that will proceed directly to San Francisco. It said that in the event there are not enough seats, priority will be given to individuals "at greater risk from coronavirus."

The French Consulate also was considering an evacuation of its nationals from the city. It said it's working on arranging a bus service to help French citizens leave Wuhan.

Cuba: Bolivia's 'Coup' Regime Sabotaged Ties

A view of Cuba's Embassy in La Paz, Bolivia, January 24, 2020.

HAVANA (Dispatches) -- **A day after Bolivia suspended diplomatic relations with Cuba, Havana accused its interim government of having sought to sabotage bilateral ties ever since it took power last year, partly under pressure from the Trump administration.**

Cuba was a key ally of Bolivia's former President Evo Morales - who resigned amid a political crisis in November - and has supported his assertion that he was toppled in a foreign-backed "coup".

Bolivia's conservative interim President Jeanine Anez, meanwhile, has tried to align the country more closely with U.S. President Donald Trump's administration, which is cranking up sanctions on Cuba.

"The acting authorities unfurled a ferocious campaign of lies against Cuba ... in particular against the Cuban medical cooperation, inciting violence against our staff," the Cuban foreign ministry said in a statement on Saturday.

"It is not casual that the facts described here coincide with a brutal, politically-motivated U.S. campaign against the international medical cooperation Cuba provides to dozens of countries."

Cuba's foreign ministry also said U.S. officials had, since the departure of Morales, "applied pressure on Bolivia to impose a deterioration in relations with Cuba".

Cuba's health service is the country's most important hard currency earner, sending more than 50,000 health workers to more than 60 countries.

Thousands of Cuban doctors have returned home after agreements with Brazil and Ecuador were ended over the past year and a half.

Bolivia's foreign ministry said in November: "There have been a number of accusations that Cuban citizens have been involved in these aggressive acts that have tormented our country in recent days."

Cuba responded by terminating its medical mission, saying Bolivian officials were fostering violence against the around 700 doctors by claiming they were instigating rebellion.

The spat was revived on Wednesday, when Anez said the Cuban government kept 80% of the payments that Bolivia made for the work of Cuban doctors in the country.

Cuba's foreign ministry denied this, saying on Saturday that from 2006 to 2012, the Caribbean island nation had actually covered all the costs of medical cooperation with Bolivia, at more than $200 million per year.

It was from then that Bolivia started paying for the medical services due to its improved economic situation.

"But it never transferred one dollar to Cuba, nor did Cuba receive any revenue," the ministry said.

News in Brief

BAMAKO, Mali (AP) — Armed men attacked an army camp in Mali near the border with Mauritania, killing 19 soldiers Sunday, the armed forces said. The camp in Sokolo in the Segou region remains under control by Malian Armed Forces, and the provisional toll includes five injured, the armed forces said in a statement on Twitter. Souleymane Maiga, a resident of Sokolo, said the attackers temporarily had taken control of the camp. "The army camp was attacked this morning by gunmen," he said. "The attackers temporarily took control of the camp and destroyed everything before leaving. Many of the soldiers who were in the camp took refuge in the village." The attack wasn't claimed but bears the hallmarks of Takfiri groups linked to Al-Qaeda that are based in the Wagadu forest, located about 50 kilometers (30 miles) from the attacked village.

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NEW DELHI (Reuters) -- India and Brazil have signed 15 accords aimed at forging closer ties between the two emerging market giants across a range of sectors, especially defense, both countries' leaders tweeted. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro took to social media to hail the closer cooperation and agreements struck during Bolsonaro's official visit to India. "Several agreements signed in infrastructure, justice, science and technology, agriculture, oil exploration, mining, health, culture and tourism," Bolsonaro tweeted, adding: "The world's confidence in Brazil is back!" For his part, Modi tweeted: "India and Brazil are focusing on expanding cooperation in the defense sector," adding that the two countries share "immense synergies" on several key issues such as the environment and fighting terrorism. Separately, Brazil's foreign minister Ernesto Araujo tweeted that the 15 accords signed by the two countries represent a move "against the structures of globalist thought". "Brazil is rising to be a great among the greats," he tweeted.

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WASHINGTON (Reuters) -- Democratic U.S. House impeachment manager Adam Schiff said on Sunday he believes Republican President Donald Trump's comment that he has not yet "paid the price" was intended as a threat. Trump launched another attack on Democrats including Schiff over the Senate impeachment trial earlier on Sunday, saying on Twitter "he has not paid the price, yet, for what he has done to our Country!" Asked on NBC's "Meet the Press" if he viewed that as a threat, Schiff said, "I think it was intended to be."

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ROME (AFP) -- Italians voted Sunday in a key regional election which the far-right hopes will shake the country's fragile coalition government to its core and return strongman Matteo Salvini to power. The wealthy centre-north region of Emilia Romagna has been a stronghold of the Italian left for over 70 years, but while left-wing values still hold sway in its cities, the right has been rallying serious support in towns and the countryside. The last polls published before the pre-election media blackout showed the anti-immigrant League neck-and-neck with the centre-left Democratic Party (PD), which governs Italy in coalition with the anti-establishment Five Star Movement (M5S). Some 3.5 million citizens were eligible to cast ballots to elect the region's president between 7am (0600 GMT) and 11pm, alongside similar regional elections in the smaller southern region of Calabria. The League hopes for a repeat of its historic win in October in Umbria, which had been a left-wing fiefdom for 50 years.

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TRIPOLI (Reuters) -- Several countries backing rival factions in Libya have violated an arms embargo which they had agreed to uphold a week ago at a summit in Berlin, the United Nations said. Last Sunday, foreign powers backing opposing camps fighting over Libya's capital Tripoli agreed at a summit hosted by Germany and the United Nations to push the parties to a lasting ceasefire and respect an existing UN arm embargo. "Over the last ten days, numerous cargo and other flights have been observed landing at Libyan airports in the western and eastern parts of the country providing the parties with advanced weapons, armored vehicles, advisers and fighters," the UN mission to Libya (UNSMIL) said in a statement. "The mission condemns these ongoing violations, which risk plunging the country into a renewed and intensified round of fighting," UNSMIL said. It blamed several countries which were present at the Berlin conference, without naming them. The United Arab Emirates and Egypt support eastern forces of Khalifa Haftar which have been trying to take Tripoli in a near-ten month campaign. The internationally recognized administration based in Tripoli trying to fend off Haftar's forces is backed by Turkey.

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MELBOURNE (Reuters) -- Australia's bushfire-stricken state of Queensland saw heavy rainfalls on Sunday dampening some of the fires that have razed 2.5 million hectares (1.2 million acres) of land since September, but the wet weather caused major flooding. Some areas received a quarter of the annual average rainfall, according to Reuters' calculations, with the state's Bureau of Meteorology saying coastal areas experienced up to 160 millimeters (6.3 inches) of rain in the 24-hour period to 9 a.m. on Sunday. "More rain expected over the coming days," the bureau said on Twitter. Several people were rescued from floodwaters and some bridges and causeways were closed, but no severe damage had been reported. Recent rains across drought-hit Queensland, Victoria and New South Wales states have substantially dampened many of the hundreds of bushfires that have burnt an area nearly the size of Greece and killed 33 people and millions of animals since September.

Trump Asked How Long Can Ukraine Withstand Russia

This undated image released by the House Judiciary Committee from documents provided by Lev Parnas to the committee in the impeachment probe against President Donald Trump, shows a photo of Lev Parnas with Rudy Giuliani.

WASHINGTON (AP) — **President Donald Trump inquired how long Ukraine would be able to resist Russian aggression without U.S. assistance during a 2018 meeting with donors that included the indicted associates of his personal attorney Rudy Giuliani.**

"How long would they last in a fight with Russia?" Trump is heard asking in the audio portion of a video recording, moments before he calls for the firing of U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Marie Yovanovitch. She was removed a year later after a campaign to discredit her by Giuliani and others, an action that is part of Democrats' case arguing for the removal of the president in his Senate impeachment trial.

A video recording of the entire 80-minute dinner at the Trump Hotel in Washington was obtained Saturday by The Associated Press. Excerpts were first published Friday by ABC News. People can be seen in only some portions of the recording.

The recording contradicts the president's statements that he did not know the Giuliani associates Lev Parnas or Igor Fruman, key figures in the investigation who were indicted last year on campaign finance charges. The recording came to light as Democrats continued to press for witnesses and other evidence to be considered during the impeachment trial.

On the recording, a voice that appears to be Parnas' can be heard saying, "The biggest problem there, I think where we need to start is we got to get rid of the ambassador." He later can be heard telling Trump: "She's basically walking around telling everybody, 'Wait, he's gonna get impeached. Just wait.'"

Trump responds: "Get rid of her! Get her out tomorrow. I don't care. Get her out tomorrow. Take her out. OK? Do it."

Ukraine came up during the dinner in the context of a discussion of energy markets, with the voice appearing to be Parnas' describing his involvement in the purchase of a Ukrainian energy company.

The group then praises Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, to which the president says: "Pompeo's going to be good. He's doing a good job. Already he's doing a good job."

At the beginning of the video, Trump is seen posing for photos before entering the blue-walled dining room. A voice that appears to be Fruman's is heard saying that "it's a great room" before a chuckle. "I couldn't believe myself."

Muslims Mark India Republic Day With Protests

Demonstrators shout slogans during a protest against a new citizenship law on the outskirts of Mumbai, India, January 26, 2020.

KOCHI/LUCKNOW (Reuters) -- **Hundreds of thousands of Indians protested across the country on Sunday against a citizenship bill that many fear is discriminatory against the minority Muslim community.**

The protests, which began last month, gathered fresh momentum as India celebrated Republic Day, in commemoration of the day the Indian constitution came into effect.

In the southern state of Kerala, organizers said more than a hundred thousand people formed a human chain. It was followed by public meetings at over 250 places across the state.

"It was not a mere human chain, but a human wall against the violation of the principles of the Constitution," said Kerala's Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, addressing a public meeting in the state capital of Thiruvananthapuram.

Another human chain spread over 11 km was also formed in Kolkata, organizers said.

The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Citizens' Register (NRC) were a key part of the election manifesto of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling Hindu nationalist party.

The government believes the legislation is needed to protect refugees across south Asia. The CAA aims to fast-track here citizenship for persecuted Hindus, Parsis, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains and Christians who arrived in India before Dec. 31, 2014, from Muslim-majority Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

Clashes between protesters and police leaving at least 25 dead have been a regular occurrence since Dec. 12, when the government passed the legislation.

Tens of thousands protested in India's financial hub of Mumbai, as well as Lucknow, the capital of populous Uttar Pradesh state which has seen the highest number of deaths since the unrest began. Both were predominantly female-led.

"Our protest against this discriminatory citizenship act ... will continue until it is withdrawn by the government," said Ambreen Rizvi, a female protester in Lucknow.

The North-eastern state of Assam witnessed five low-intensity explosions for which the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), a militant group, has taken responsibility. No casualties were reported.

In New Delhi, the government hosted the annual Republic Day parade aimed at showcasing India's military hardware and cultural diversity. Brazil's president Jair Bolsonaro was the chief guest.

Protesters also gathered in the capital, including in the area of Shaheen Bagh, where hundreds of residents have blocked a major highway since December.

A women-only led rally with over 20,000 protesters also gathered in a suburb in Mumbai to mark their dissent against the new law.

Philippines Lowers Volcano Alert; Thousands Return

MANILA, Philippines (AP) — **Philippine authorities on Sunday lowered the alert level at Taal Volcano, two weeks after it began spewing ash, steam and rocks, a move that will allow many of the more than 376,000 displaced villagers to return home.**

A popular tourist destination just south of Manila because of its picturesque setting in the middle of a lake, Taal erupted on Jan. 12. It caused no known deaths but delivered an early crisis this year for one of the world's most disaster-prone nations.

"Taal volcano's condition in the two weeks ... has generally declined into less frequent volcanic earthquake activity, decelerated ground deformation ... and weak steam and gas emissions at the main crater," the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology said.

The government's agency lowered the alert level from 4 to 3, which means there's a "decreased tendency toward a hazardous eruption." The highest level-5 alert indicates a major and much more dangerous eruption.

The agency also reduced to half the danger zone where residents have to be evacuated, from the 14-kilometer (8.7-mile) radius around the volcano. Taal had last erupted 43 years ago.

"We have to be careful of Taal because of the danger it may still bring, so at the lower level, there should be heightened preparedness. People should brace for rapid evacuation," Renato Solidum, the head of the institute, said in a televised news conference.

Mayor Daniel Reyes of Agoncillo, a town along the western shores of Taal Lake overlooking the island where the volcano lies, said he was relieved but remained concerned. Residents of Agoncillo and nearby Laurel could still not return home because of the towns' proximity to the volcano. Thousands of villagers who used to reside and work on Volcano Island will not be allowed to return permanently, Batangas Gov. Hermilando Mandanas said.

Mandanas warned returning villagers to assess the safety of their villages and houses, many of which remained blanketed by volcanic ash or had been damaged by the eruption and earthquakes.

"It's somehow a relief but we're still under a total lockdown," Reyes told The Associated Press, adding all the 44,000 villagers of his town will remain in evacuation centers.

Footage showed thousands of elated villagers yelling "thank you" as they drove back in droves to their still-dusty towns and cities on board motorcycles, motorcycle taxis and some cars.

More than 376,000 people fled to safety from ash-blanketed towns and cities in hard-hit Batangas province.