



MOSCOW (Reuters) -- A Russian firm accused of meddling in the 2016 U.S. presidential election said on Tuesday it planned to file a \$50 billion lawsuit against the United States after a U.S. federal judge dismissed the criminal case against it. Concord Management and Consulting LLC was accused of funding a propaganda operation to tilt the 2016 vote in favor of President Donald Trump. The case was set to be tried next month, but the case was dismissed on Monday at the request of U.S. prosecutors. Prosecutors questioned the merit of holding the trial, saying Concord had tried to use case evidence to discredit the investigation, refused to cooperate and that there were also challenges raised by some evidence being classified as secret. The firm's executive, Evgeny Prigozhin, a businessman with ties to President Vladimir Putin and who was also charged in the case, was not expected to attend the trial in the United States. On Tuesday, Concord hailed the dismissal of the case as a victory and said it was proof the case had been based on lies aimed at blaming Russia for the United States' own domestic problems. "A \$50 billion Concord vs U.S. lawsuit for unlawful prosecution and sanctions is currently being drawn up," it said in a statement.

LONDON (Reuters) -- British cases of coronavirus rose 26% to 1,950 from 1,543 the day before, the health ministry said. Britain reported its first confirmed coronavirus case on Jan. 31. There have so far been 56 reported deaths. "As of 9am on 17 March 2020, 50,442 people have been tested in the UK, of which 48,492 were confirmed negative and 1,950 were confirmed as positive," the government said. British foreign minister Dominic Raab advised British nationals on Tuesday to stop all non-essential travel globally for the next 30 days, the latest stringent measure taken by the government to try to stem a growing coronavirus outbreak. "With immediate effect, I have taken the decision to advise British nationals against non-essential travel globally, for an initial period of 30 days and of course subject to ongoing review," Raab told parliament.

RIO DE JANEIRO (Reuters) -- Hundreds of prisoners broke out of four Brazilian jails on Monday, the day before their day-release privileges were due to be suspended over the coronavirus outbreak, Sao Paulo state prison authorities and local media reported. The Sao Paulo state prison authority said it could not say how many inmates had escaped as it was "still tallying the exact number of fugitives." Local media reported that as many as 1,000 had fled from four jails - Mongaguá, Tremembé, Porto Feliz and Mirandópolis - ahead of the lockdown. A video on social media showed a long stream of prisoners purportedly fleeing a prison. Reuters was unable to verify the veracity or location of the video. The Sao Paulo state prison authority said "acts of insubordination" had taken place at the jails ahead of the suspension of the day-release program. Sao Paulo state is home to the First Capital Command, Brazil's most powerful prison gang, which is expanding quickly across the country and in neighboring nations. It traffics guns, drugs and other contraband. Brazil's overstuffed prisons often see deadly prison riots between rival gangs.

MUMBAI/KARACHI (Reuters) - India closed the Taj Mahal, its principal tourist site, and the financial hub of Mumbai ordered offices providing non-essential services to keep half their staff at home in ramped up measures to curb the coronavirus in South Asia. Mumbai, a densely populated metropolis of 18 million people, also authorized hospital and airport authorities to stamp wrists of those ordered to self-isolate with indelible ink reading "Home Quarantined" and displaying the date the quarantine ends. The moves, announced late on Monday, come just days after the city shut down schools, cinemas, malls and gyms, and also banned mass gatherings. India's western state of Maharashtra, home to Mumbai, has been the hardest hit with 39 confirmed coronavirus cases, or roughly a quarter of the 126 cases in the country. A patient in the state died after contracting the virus on Tuesday. Praveen Pardeshi, who heads Mumbai's civic body, told Reuters: the third death in India. Pakistan reported the number of confirmed cases had more than doubled for a second consecutive day, reaching 187.

YEREVAN (Reuters) -- Armenia declared a state of emergency until April 14 to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus, and postponed a referendum on changes to the Constitutional Court until after the emergency. Armenia, a country of 3 million people, had reported 52 coronavirus cases as of the end of Monday, the highest number among countries in the South Caucasus region. All educational institutions will remain shut until the end of the emergency, and the borders with neighboring Georgia and Iran will be closed, the government said. Foreigners from countries with a high incidence of coronavirus will be barred from entering, while Armenian citizens will be able to leave only by air. The transportation of goods will continue.

France Declares 'War', Moves Into Total Lockdown



France has ordered most people to stay home from midday Tuesday.

PARIS (AFP) -- France moved into a near-total lockdown Tuesday over the coronavirus, the latest country to impose draconian restrictions affecting the lives of hundreds of millions of people around the world.

European leaders also plan to ban all non-essential travel into the continent on Tuesday in a bid to stem a pandemic that has killed thousands, upended society and battered economies.

With French President Emmanuel Macron describing the battle against COVID-19 as a "war", governments around the world are scrambling to keep the public safe with measures rarely seen in peacetime, slamming borders shut and forcing citizens to stay home.

The crisis is infecting every sector of the economy, and global stocks have been on a rollercoaster ride, with Wall Street on Monday sinking more than 12 percent in the worst session since the crash of 1987.

Investors are still in panic mode, despite emergency interventions by central banks and governments to shore up confidence.

After the initial outbreak in a Chinese city in December, Europe has emerged as the epicenter of the virus with more deaths now recorded outside China

than inside. COVID-19 has now killed more than 7,000 people worldwide, including over 2,100 in Italy, the worst-hit country outside China, and more than 180,000 cases have been recorded in 145 countries.

In a somber address to the nation, Macron ordered the French to stay at home for 15 days from midday Tuesday, following similar measures by other European countries.

Most shops, restaurants and tourist sites in the world's most visited country are already shuttered, but in some areas desperate shoppers crowded supermarkets before the new rules took effect.

About 100,000 police and gendarmes will be out on the streets to enforce the measures, after Macron warned violations would be punished.

"We are at war, a public health war certainly. We are fighting not against an army or another nation. But the enemy is there, invisible and elusive and on the move," he said.

With European nations already closing their borders, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said she would ask the leaders of the bloc's Schengen visa-free border zone to stop all non-essential travel into the area.

Africans Alarmed as Coronavirus Spreads



Shoppers stock up on groceries as they wear protective masks to contain coronavirus at a Makro store in Johannesburg, South Africa, March 16, 2020.

KIGALI (Reuters) -- Alarmed consumers thronged markets across Africa on Tuesday, many in masks and gloves, to stock up as the coronavirus spread on the world's poorest continent.

Prices rose in some parts, though at least one country, Rwanda, sought to control costs of staple foods.

"It is as if people are preparing for war," said an astonished shopkeeper as Rwandans clamored for rice, cooking oil, sugar and flour at a market in the capital Kigali. "Prices have gone up - but still they buy."

Initially spared as the coronavirus battered China and then spread out, Africa has seen a rush of cases this month and governments are taking drastic measures to curb its spread.

At least 30 African nations have now reported more than 400 cases, seven in Rwanda. For many poorer Africans, panic-buying was a privilege they could not afford.

"Rich people are not afraid of high prices. They are buying in huge quantities," said 43-year-old Pascal Murengezi, a father-of-three hawking second hand clothes outside the Nyarungege market in Kigali who said he could not afford more than a day's worth of food.

"If the outbreak continues, I don't know how I will sell clothes on empty

streets." The shopkeeper, who declined to give his name fearing a visit from inspectors, said Tanzanian rice had risen from 27,000 francs (\$29) to 30,000 francs per 25 kg bag while Pakistani rice was up from 22,000 francs to 28,000 francs.

Speaking as shoppers in masks and gloves picked over items, he blamed wholesalers for the increases.

The trade ministry in Rwanda fixed prices late on Monday for 17 food items including rice, sugar and cooking oil. It did not specify punishments for price-gouging.

Exasperated by the rises, Beatrice, a 52-year-old Rwandan with a child and no job, said she could only buy a minimum of rice. "You can't see your children go hungry," she said. "We don't know when this coronavirus will stop. If I had enough money, I would buy a lot more food."

Kenya, East Africa's economic powerhouse, also saw a rush on shops after reporting its first coronavirus case on Friday. Within minutes, shoppers at the upscale Carrefour supermarket near the United Nations complex in Nairobi began piling trolleys with wipes, sanitizer, and staples like rice and long-life milk.

Tusky's, another Kenyan supermarket, urged customers not to panic and this week launched a home delivery service.

Italy Rushes 10,000 Student Doctors Into Service



A coronavirus patient arrives on a stretcher at the Columbus Covid Hospital in Rome, March 16, 2020.

ROME (Reuters) -- Italy will rush 10,000 student doctors into service, scrapping their final exams, in an effort to help the struggling health service cope with the coronavirus onslaught.

Some 2,158 people have died of the disease in Italy since the outbreak came to light on Feb. 21, while the total number of confirmed cases has surged to 27,980, making Italy the worst-hit country outside of China.

The crisis has pushed hospitals to breaking point at the epicenter of the contagion in northern Italy and left

other regions scrambling to strengthen their own health networks as the number of infected rises nationwide.

University Minister Gaetano Manfredi said the government would let this year's crop of medicine graduates start work some eight or nine months ahead of schedule and waive the mandatory exams they normally sit before qualifying.

"This means immediately releasing into the National Health System the energy of about 10,000 doctors, which is fundamental to dealing with the shortage that our country is suffering," he

said in a statement.

The graduates will be sent to work in general practitioners' clinics and at old peoples' homes, freeing up more experienced colleagues who will be sent to the rapidly filling hospitals.

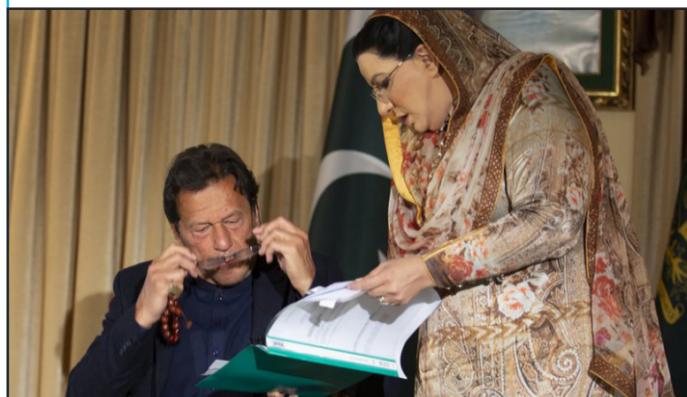
Over three weeks, 1,135 people have needed intensive care in Lombardy, the northern region hardest hit. The region has only 800 intensive care beds, according to Giacomo Grasselli, head of the intensive care unit at Milan's Policlinico hospital.

Authorities have been working to set up hundreds of intensive care beds in a specially created facility in the Fiera Milano exhibition center, but are still waiting for sufficient respirators and qualified personnel.

Former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi said on Tuesday he would donate 10 million euros (\$11 million) to help equip the new center, joining a growing list of wealthy Italians offering funds to bolster the struggling health sector.

In Rome, oil major ENI has paid for the multi-million euro conversion of the small, private Columbus hospital into a center for treating coronavirus patients, with the first sufferers being stretched into the unit on Monday.

Khan: Virus May Devastate Developing Nations



Pakistan government spokesperson Firdous Ashiq Awan consults with Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan in Islamabad, March 16, 2020.

ISLAMABAD (AP) -- Pakistan's prime minister said he fears the new coronavirus will devastate the economies of developing nations, and warned richer economies to prepare to write off the debts of the world's poorer countries.

In an interview with The Associated Press, Imran Khan criticized recent comments by the president of neighboring Afghanistan, which appeared to reference accusations that Pakistan used militants to further its own goals in years past.

Khan also raised concern over India's worst Hindu-Muslim violence in decades, saying the Indian prime minister's Hindu nationalist-led government threatens to disenfranchise hundreds of millions of people through a controversial new citizenship law.

He further called for lifting sanctions against Iran.

Khan sat down with the AP at his office in the resplendent white-domed government headquarters in the capital of Islamabad. He'd spent much of his day meeting experts about the effect of the coronavirus outbreak in Pakistan, which has confirmed 183 cases so far.

"My worry is poverty and hunger," Khan said. "The world community has to think of some sort of a debt write-off for countries like us, which are very vulnerable, at least that will help us in coping with (the coronavirus)."

He said that if a serious outbreak happens in Pakistan, he's worried that his government's efforts to lift

the ailing economy out of near-collapse would begin an unstoppable slide backward. Exports would fall off, unemployment would soar and an onerous national debt would become an impossible burden. Pakistan secured a \$6 billion bailout from the International Monetary Fund last year.

The global virus pandemic presents the biggest test yet for Khan's populist leadership since he took office in 2018. He's mobilized Pakistan's young people, who are among his largest followers. His critics say he came to power with the help of the country's powerful military, and human rights groups say he's cracked down on critical media outlets.

"It's not just Pakistan. I would imagine the same in India, in the subcontinent, in African countries," he said, referring to the virus. "If it spreads, we will all have problems with our health facilities. We just don't have that capability. We just don't have the resources."

Most people who get the new coronavirus and the COVID-19 illness it causes experience only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough, and recover within weeks. But the virus is highly contagious and can be spread by people with no visible symptoms. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia.

China, U.S. in War of Words Over 'Chinese Virus'

BEIJING (AFP) -- A spat between the U.S. and China over the novel coronavirus escalated on Tuesday as President Donald Trump angered Beijing by referring to the pathogen as the "Chinese Virus."

The two countries have sparred over the origin of the virus for days, with a Chinese official saying it was brought to China by the U.S. army and American officials using terms seen as stigmatizing a nation.

"The United States will be powerfully those industries, like Airlines and others, that are particularly affected by the Chinese Virus," Trump tweeted Monday night.

He doubled down on the comment on Tuesday morning while tweeting about how U.S. states were being affected, saying: "Some are being hit hard by the Chinese Virus, some are being hit practically not at all."

Trump's allies had previously referred to the pandemic as the "Chinese coronavirus", but Beijing said Tuesday it was "strongly indignant" over the phrase, which it called "a kind of stigmatization".

The United States should "immediately stop its unjustified accusations against China," foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang told reporters.

A commentary by the official Xinhua news agency said

using "racist and xenophobic names to cast blame for the outbreak on other countries can only reveal politicians' irresponsibility and incompetence which will intensify virus fears".

The war of words reignited diplomatic tensions between the two countries, which have tussled over trade and other disputes since Trump took office.

Trump's comments were also criticized inside the U.S., with warnings it could incite a backlash against the Asian-American community.

"Our Asian-American communities -- people YOU serve -- are already suffering. They don't need you fueling more bigotry," tweeted New York city mayor Bill de Blasio, whose state is one of the hardest-hit by the virus in the U.S.

The World Health Organization said more cases and deaths had been reported in the rest of the world than in China. The new coronavirus virus was first detected late last year, with China's own health officials initially saying its source was a live animal market in the central city of Wuhan, whose government had initially tried to cover up the outbreak.

But China has sought to distance itself from the virus, saying the origin is still unknown, while seeking global goodwill by offering aid to countries facing serious outbreaks.