

Death Toll From Virus Nears 1,400 People



A worker checks the temperature of a passenger arriving into Hong Kong International Airport with an infrared thermometer, following the coronavirus outbreak in Hong Kong, China, February 7, 2020

BEIJING (AFP) -- The death toll from China's virus epidemic neared 1,400 on Friday with six medical workers among the victims, underscoring the country's struggle to contain a deepening health crisis.

Nearly 64,000 people are now recorded as having fallen ill from the virus in China, with officials revealing that 1,716 health workers had been infected as of Tuesday.

The scale of the epidemic swelled this week after authorities in central Hubei province, the epicenter of the contagion, changed their criteria for counting cases, adding thousands of new patients to their tally.

The health emergency in China has caused fears of further global contagion,

with more than two-dozen countries reporting hundreds of cases among them. Three people have died outside mainland China.

The majority of cases of infections among health workers was in Hubei's capital, Wuhan, where many have lacked proper masks and gear to protect themselves in hospitals dealing with a deluge of patients.

Battling the epidemic is a "big test for the country's governance system and governance ability," said Chinese President Xi Jinping, who chaired a political meeting on government reforms, according to state broadcaster CCTV.

The outbreak has exposed "shortcomings," Xi acknowledged, adding that China needed to reform its public health and

epidemic prevention and control systems.

Authorities in Hubei on Thursday started counting patients who were "clinically diagnosed" via lung imaging, in addition to those who undergo lab tests.

The revision added nearly 15,000 patients to Hubei's count in a single day, with officials explaining that past cases were included. The first cases emerged in December in Wuhan.

On Friday, Hubei's health commission said another 116 people had died and more than 4,800 new cases were reported. Of those cases, more than 3,000 were "clinically diagnosed".

The WHO said the numbers included cases going back weeks.

The sharp one-day increase "does not represent a significant change in the trajectory of the outbreak," said Michael Ryan, head of the WHO's health emergencies program.

The move will ensure patients get treated as early as possible, instead of having to wait for laboratory tests, health officials said.

"There have been some backlogs in testing and this is also going to help in ensuring that people get adequate care," Ryan said.

The National Health Commission said the new criteria would only apply to Hubei.

The commission reported five other deaths and 217 new cases elsewhere in China, as the number of new patients outside Hubei fell for a 10th straight day.

Lukashenko: Russia Insisted on Unification With Belarus



Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko, left, talks to his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin in this file photo.

MINSK, Belarus (AP) -- The president of Belarus said Friday that Russia insisted on merging the two states during last week's talks on further integrating the countries' economies.

"They understand integration as swallowing up Belarus. This isn't integration. It's incorporation. I will never go for this," President Alexander Lukashenko said during a visit to a paper plant in southeastern Belarus.

"I will always fight for our land to remain sovereign and independent."

Your first president that you once

elected will never be the last," he added.

Tension has been running high between the neighboring ex-Soviet states for several months now. As negotiations on closer ties stalled, Russia halted oil supplies to Belarus and Lukashenko repeatedly accused the Kremlin of pushing for a merger of the two countries.

Lukashenko and Russian President Vladimir Putin sat down last Friday for yet another round of talks in Sochi, but failed to reach an agreement.

Merging with Belarus is seen by

many as a strategy for Putin to stay in power well past the legally mandated end of his presidential term in 2024 by becoming the head of a new state.

As Lukashenko has resisted the integration effort, the Kremlin has increased pressure by halting oil supplies to Belarus, which relies on Russia for more than 80% of its energy needs.

Lukashenko has since vowed to find alternative oil suppliers and boasted about warming ties with the West in an apparent bid to win concessions from Russia. So far Belarus has been able to secure a shipment of oil from Norway and is negotiating supplies from Kazakhstan.

Lukashenko, who has ruled Belarus with an iron fist for more than two decades and is up for re-election this year, doesn't want to become a governor in a single state with Russia, Minsk-based political analyst Alexander Klaskovsky told The Associated Press.

"The Kremlin has so far failed to scare Minsk by cutting subsidies ahead of the presidential race in Belarus," Klaskovsky said.

Lukashenko said Friday that talks on closer ties between Russia and Belarus would continue, but only "the questions of integrating economies" would be on the table.

Amnesty: Nigerian Troops Burnt Villages

ABUJA (Reuters) -- Nigeria's military burned down villages and forcibly displaced hundreds of people in its fight against Takfiri militants in the country's northeast, rights group Amnesty International alleged on Friday.

Nigeria's military, which has frequently been accused of human rights abuses in its decade-long fight against Boko Haram and more recently Daesh's West African branch, said in a statement that Amnesty's report had been falsified.

Three residents interviewed by Reuters confirmed Amnesty's findings.

New allegations have sparked investigations by the International Criminal Court in the Hague and hampered Nigeria's ability to purchase arms, a source of frustration for its military's leaders. However, convictions of soldiers have been rare and the military has repeatedly denied wrongdoing.

In the latest allegations, Amnesty said Nigerian soldiers razed three villages after forcing hundreds of men and women to leave their homes in the northeastern state of Borno in January.

The human rights group said it interviewed 12 victims and reviewed satellite images that showed several large fires in the area and almost every structure razed.

Residents described soldiers going house to house and rounding people up, then making them walk to a main road and board trucks, it said.

"We saw our houses go into flames," a woman of around 70 told Amnesty. "We all started crying."

The trucks took more than 400 people to a camp for people displaced by the conflict in Maiduguri, the main city in the region.

"These brazen acts of razing entire villages, deliberately destroying civilian homes and forcibly displacing their inhabitants with no imperative military grounds, should be investigated as possible war crimes," said Osai Ojigbo, director for Amnesty International Nigeria, in Friday's statement detailing the group's investigation.

Soldiers also detained six men, beating some of them, and held them for almost a month before releasing them without charge on Jan. 30, Amnesty said.

It cited Nigerian Army statements from the time that said six Boko Haram suspects had been captured and hundreds of captives freed from the militants.

"They say they saved us from Boko Haram, but it's a lie," said one man aged roughly 65, according to Amnesty. "Boko Haram isn't coming to our village."

Three residents from two of the affected villages, now living in Maiduguri, described to Reuters the same events as in the rights group's report.

"The soldiers called us Boko Haram and set our houses ablaze, before evacuating all of us," one of the residents said.

Venezuela Sues U.S. at ICC Over Unilateral Sanctions



Venezuela's Minister of Foreign Affairs Jorge Arreaza

CARACAS (Dispatches) -- Venezuela has filed a lawsuit against the United States at the International Criminal Court (ICC) for Washington's sanctions decreed by Caracas as "crimes against humanity."

Venezuelan Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza made the announcement as he spoke to journalists in The Hague on Thursday.

Arreaza said the Latin American country had submitted the 60-page suit to the court, stressing that the U.S. policy of sanctions has been "a death sentence for tens of thousands of Venezuelans per year."

"Our government is seeking refuge with international law," the top Venezuelan diplomat said. "We are convinced the consequences of the unilateral measures (by the United States) constitute crimes against humanity against the civilian population."

Arreaza also said the lawsuit, handed to ICC chief prosecutor Fatou Bensouda on Thursday, was accompanied by a letter from Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro.

The 57-year-old leader had earlier announced that he would file a lawsuit against the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump over the economic damages it caused to his country through its unilateral sanctions against Venezuela.

"We will seek international justice

with a lawsuit against the government of Donald Trump. I have ordered this and I ask for all the support from the national general public, all the support for this international claim," Maduro said at a rally in Caracas on Monday.

"A global lawsuit against the policy of aggression and sanctions of coercive measures; Venezuela will seek justice in international courts."

Maduro also took a swipe at Venezuelan opposition figure Juan Guaido, and said, "We have to point a finger at the person responsible for these sanctions. His name is Juan Guaido, he is directly responsible for these sanctions."

Guaido is considered responsible for causing political crisis in Venezuela when he unilaterally declared himself "interim president" of the country in January last year, rejecting the outcome of the May 2018 election, which Maduro had won. Guaido also later launched an abortive coup against the elected government.

Guaido's self-proclamation as president and his coup received full support from Washington. Caracas has said election results must be respected, but has applied lenience and refrained from arresting Guaido over the coup.

The U.S. has imposed several rounds of sanctions against the oil-rich South American country aimed at ousting Maduro and replacing him with Guaido.

Macron Candidate for Paris Mayor Quits Over Sex Row



Former French government spokesperson and La Republique en Marche (LREM) candidate for the upcoming Paris 2020 mayoral election Benjamin Griveaux attends a news conference in Paris, February 5, 2020.

PARIS (Reuters) -- French President Emmanuel Macron suffered a setback on Friday when one of his closest lieutenants, Benjamin Griveaux, pulled out of the race to become mayor of Paris after it was alleged he sent sexual images to a woman who is not his wife.

"I have decided to withdraw my candidacy from the municipal election," Griveaux said in a video statement.

He said he and his family had been subjected to months of anonymous statements defaming him, and threats to disclose private conversations stolen from him.

A new level had been reached on Thursday with "websites and social networks carrying ignoble attacks about my private life," he said

A Russian dissident artist, Pyotr Pavlensky, published screenshots of an online chat which he said was between Griveaux and a woman who is not his wife and exposed his "hypocrisy".

The chat included a video showing a man's genitals. Griveaux has not disputed that he sent the messages.

Griveaux, 42, is one of the "Macron boys" - the clique that helped propel the former investment banker to the Elysee Palace.

He started in politics as an adviser to Dominique Strauss-Kahn, the former head of the International Monetary Fund who in 2011 was charged with sexual assault on

a maid in a New York hotel. Prosecutors dropped the charges, and Strauss-Kahn said the sex was consensual.

Griveaux was central to Macron's bid to control the French capital and build a local power base for his party in mayoral elections next month.

His mayoral bid though was already struggling, with opinion polls showing him in third place.

Macron's LREM party had chosen Griveaux to represent it in the Paris mayoral campaign over Cedric Villani, an eccentric mathematician.

Officials from Macron's party were planning to meet to decide what to do. It was unclear if the party would now rally behind Villani, the rebel lawmaker who was expelled from the LREM last month, or field another candidate.

Griveaux, a divisive figure, alienated many within his own camp after his selection by referring to party rivals as "arseholes" among other insults in a leaked conversation with journalists.

French politicians from all camps denounced in unison the leak of private material, which many said constituted an unacceptable Americanization of politics in France, where politicians' private lives have long been considered off limits.

"We must collectively be responsible and say: not here, not in France," Guérini said.

News in Brief

BERLIN (Reuters) -- German police detained 12 men on Friday suspected of setting up a far-right organization with the goal of carrying out attacks against politicians, asylum seekers and Muslims, the Federal Prosecutor's Office (GPA) said. Prosecutors said four of the suspects had set up a "terrorist organization" in September 2019 and regularly met and contacted each other by phone and in online chat forums and chat groups. They had no immediate plan to carry out an attack. The other eight men were detained on suspicion of supporting the organization with money and weapons, the GPA said. The suspects wanted their attacks to create havoc and an atmosphere of fear that resembles a civil war, it added. "The goal of the organization was to shake and eventually destroy the democratic system and social cohesion of the federal republic," the GPA said. "For the purpose of creating an conditions that resemble a civil war, attacks that were not yet concrete against politicians, asylum seekers and members of the Muslim faith were planned."

WASHINGTON (AFP) -- U.S. Attorney General Bill Barr on Thursday delivered a highly unusual public rebuke of Donald Trump, saying the president's tweets were making his job at the Justice Department "impossible." "I have a problem with some of the tweets," Barr said in an interview with ABC News, adding: "I cannot do my job here at the department with a constant background commentary that undercuts me." "I think it's time to stop the tweeting about Department of Justice criminal cases," said Barr. His interview came as Trump stands accused of interfering with the sentencing recommendation for his former advisor, Roger Stone -- prompting four Justice Department prosecutors to resign from the case this week. The outburst was all the more remarkable as Barr has emerged as a powerful defender of Trump, earning the nickname of the "president's attorney" from critics.

MUNICH (Reuters) -- Germany's president took an indirect swipe at U.S. President Donald Trump on Friday in accusing Washington, China and Russia of stoking global mistrust and insecurity with a "great powers" competition that could threaten a new nuclear arms race. In opening remarks at the annual Munich Security Conference, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier deplored the three big powers' approach to global affairs and, without naming Trump, took issue with his vow to "make America great again." "Great again" - even at the expense of neighbors and partners," quipped Steinmeier, a former Social Democrat foreign minister whose comments on foreign policy carry authority. As foreign minister in 2014, he was central to the so-called "Munich consensus" when German leaders said Berlin was ready to assume more responsibility in global affairs. Steinmeier pressed that point again on Friday, but not before bemoaning the foreign policy approaches of Russia, China and the United States.

ALGIERS (Reuters) -- Thousands of Algerians marched on Friday, a year since the start of weekly protests calling for a complete overhaul of the ruling elite, an end to corruption and the army's withdrawal from politics. "We will not stop," chanted a crowd in the center of the capital Algiers, despite a large police presence. Over the past year the protesters have changed the face of Algeria's power structure, causing the fall of a veteran president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, and the arrest of dozens of leading figures including a once untouchable former intelligence chief. However, while the new president has released people detained in the protests, set up a commission to amend the constitution and offered talks to the opposition, much of the old ruling elite remains in place.

SAO PAULO (AFP) -- Scientists in Antarctica have recorded a new record temperature of 20.75 degrees Celsius (69.35 Fahrenheit), breaking the barrier of 20 degrees for the first time on the continent, a researcher said Thursday. "We'd never seen a temperature this high in Antarctica," Brazilian scientist Carlos Schaefer told AFP. He cautioned that the reading, taken at a monitoring station on an island off the continent's northern tip on February 9, "has no meaning in terms of a climate-change trend," because it is a one-off temperature and not part of a long-term data set. But news that the icy continent is now recording temperatures in the relatively balmy 20s is likely to further fuel fears about the warming of the planet. The reading was taken at Seymour Island, part of a chain off the peninsula that curves out from the northern tip of Antarctica. The island is home to Argentina's Marambio research base. Schaefer, a soil scientist, said the reading was taken as part of a 20-year-old research project on the impact of climate change on the region's permafrost. The previous high was in the 19s, he said.

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) -- A fire swept through an orphanage run by a Pennsylvania-based nonprofit group in Haiti, killing 13 children, including infants, health care workers said Friday. Rose-Marie Louis, a child-care worker, told The Associated Press that she saw 13 children's bodies being carried out of the Orphanage of the Church of Bible Understanding in the Kenscoff area outside Port-au-Prince, the Haitian capital. Marie-Sonia Chery, a nurse at the nearby Baptist Mission Hospital, confirmed that 13 boys and girls had died. Louis, who worked at the orphanage, said the fire began around 9 p.m. Thursday and firefighters took about 1.5 hours to arrive. About seven were babies or toddlers and about six were roughly 10 or 11 years old, she said. She said the orphanage had been using candles for light due to problems with its generator and inverter.