

Latin America Death Toll From Virus Tops 15,000



Sater-mawe indigenous men contact a doctor to receive medical guidance amid the coronavirus pandemic at Amazonas State, one of the most affected regions in Brazil, on May 5, 2020.

MONTEVIDEO (AFP) -- More than 15,000 people have been killed by the novel coronavirus in Latin America and the Caribbean as of 0230 GMT Wednesday, according to an AFP tally based on official reports.

Across the region more than 282,000 COVID-19 cases have been officially reported.

Topping the death toll list is Brazil, with 7,921 fatalities and 114,715 cases; followed by Mexico with 2,271 fatalities and Ecuador with 1,569 deaths.

Experts believe that the pandemic will peak in Latin America in the coming days.

Several countries, including Ecuador,

Colombia and the Dominican Republic, have extended their lockdown measures in an attempt to halt the spread of the virus.

The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) has asked governments to be "cautious" when they begin to loosen restrictions, warning that virus transmission remains "very high" in Brazil, Ecuador, Peru, Chile and Mexico.

Brazil was the first country in the region to report a case of the novel coronavirus on February 26. The patient was a 61 year-old man who had been traveling in Lombardy, one of Italian regions most affected by the pandemic.

The International Monetary Fund said

they expect a 5.2 percent GDP contraction across the region due to the coronavirus crisis.

Alejandro Werner, head of the IMF's Western Hemisphere section, said the region faces the specter of another "lost decade" between 2015-25, comparable to the no-growth era of the 1980s.

The mayor of Manaus, the biggest city in the Amazon rainforest region, asked world leaders Tuesday for help fighting the novel coronavirus, which has brought his city's health system to the brink of collapse.

Manaus is the capital of the Brazilian state of Amazonas, which has been devastated by the pandemic.

With only one intensive care unit to serve a state more than four times the area of Germany, Manaus has been overwhelmed by the outbreak, leaving hospitals to store cadavers in refrigerator trucks.

Amazonas state has registered 649 deaths from COVID-19 so far.

"For decades, we have played an important role for the health of the planet, keeping 96 percent of our original forest," Mayor Arthur Virgilio Virgilio said.

"Now, in return, we need medical personnel, ventilators, protective equipment, anything that can save the lives of those who protect the great forest."

The COVID-19 virus has killed more than 254,000 people around the world and infected more than 3.6 million people.

Russia's Coronavirus Cases Rise by Another 10,000



Mourners gather near grave diggers burying a coronavirus disease victim in the special purpose section of a graveyard on the outskirts of Saint Petersburg, Russia on May 5, 2020.

MOSCOW (Dispatches) -- Russia recorded more than 10,000 new coronavirus cases for the fourth day in a row on Wednesday, surpassing Germany to become the country with the sixth-highest number of confirmed infections.

Russia has emerged as a new hotspot for the virus and in recent days has been recording the highest number of new infections in Europe.

Health officials on Wednesday reported 10,559 new cases over the last 24 hours, bringing the total number of infections to 165,929, with 1,537 deaths.

The number of infections in Russia has been rising by more than 10,000 a day since Sunday, in contrast to countries in western Europe who are taking steps to ease lockdown measures after their rates of new cases and deaths dropped.

A non-working quarantine period is in place in Russia until May 11 and authorities have said it will be lifted or extended depending on the extent of outbreaks in different regions.

President Vladimir Putin was set to chair a government meeting to discuss a gradual withdrawal from virus lockdown later on Wednesday.

Moscow, which has emerged as the epicenter of the pandemic in Russia, has recorded 85,973 cases and 866 deaths.

Despite the sharp rise in cases, Russia's official fatality rate has remained low in comparison to countries including Italy, Spain and the United States.

Officials credit quick moves to close the country's borders, as well as widespread testing and tracking of infections.

Putin's approval rating slipped to 59% in April from 63% a month earlier amid the coronavirus crisis, its lowest level in more than two decades, the Levada-Center opinion pollster said on Wednesday.

But Levada cautioned that a change in its polling methodology may have slightly distorted the result to Putin's disadvantage.

The poll was conducted by phone this time because of the coronavirus-related lockdown, rather than face-to-face, something that Levada's Deputy Director Denis Volkov said may have clipped 1-2% off Putin's rating.

Even taking that into account, Volkov said an outcome of 61% would still mean Putin's approval rating was on a par with its lowest level recorded yet in 2013, a year before Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea prompted his ratings to surge.

Levada said the poll was conducted on April 24-27 and that a total of 1,608 people were polled across Russia.

EU Seeks to Woo Balkans Away From China, Russia



A picture taken on March 30, 2020, shows a billboard bearing Chinese President Xi Jinping's face looking down over a boulevard in Belgrade, Serbia.

BRUSSELS/BELGRADE (Dispatches) -- European Union (EU) leaders hosted a summit on Wednesday with their six Balkan counterparts whose praise for Chinese and Russian support during the coronavirus crisis has ruffled feathers in the bloc, officials and diplomats said.

The EU says it has not been given enough credit for the 3.3 billion euros (\$3.6 billion) it is providing, which officials said outweigh medical supplies Beijing and Moscow sent to Serbia and Bosnia in the early phase of the epidemic.

The summit, planned for the Croatian capital Zagreb 20 years after the first ever EU-Balkan gathering, took place via

video, linking the heads of Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Albania, Bosnia and North Macedonia with the 27 EU leaders. Still scarred by 1990s wars, all six countries aspire to join the EU, though the response to the COVID-19 disease is likely to dominate.

"The summit itself is the message, to say: we want you to join," said a senior EU diplomat involved in preparing the summit. "But we will also say that you cannot pander to the Chinese and the Russians when it suits you."

China and Russia flew doctors and medical supplies to Bosnia and Serbia in March to help halt spreading of the coronavirus at a time when the EU's initial

response was slow. Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic publicly thanked President Xi Jinping and the Chinese people.

The Serb member of Bosnia's tripartite presidency, Milorad Dodik, praised Russia last month, criticizing Brussels for initially limiting exports of medical aid to non-EU members.

"The Europe we believed in ten years ago does not exist today," he said at the time, although he later softened his language.

After years of neglect, the six countries now have the attention of EU governments, who have been worried about Chinese and Russian influence in the region for several years.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen warned in November that if the EU did not do more, "others will."

In March, North Macedonia and Albania won approval to start EU membership talks after a two-year delay, helping to counter a sense in the region that hopes of joining the bloc were fading.

To add to the problems, five EU countries do not recognize Kosovo's independence, including Spain.

At the summit, all leaders sought to appear against neutral backgrounds to avoid any insignia that one EU official said "would make the video conference difficult" as lingering diplomatic tensions mean nationalist symbols could cause offence.

South Korea: No Signs Kim Received Heart Surgery



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un (C) cuts a ribbon to open a Township of Samjiyon County in a photo from KCNA published on May 4, 2020.

SEOUL (Reuters) -- There are no signs North Korean leader Kim Jong Un received heart surgery when he disappeared from state media for three weeks, but he reduced public activity due to coronavirus concerns, Yonhap news agency reported on Wednesday.

Kim attended the completion of a fertilizer plant, North Korea's official media said on Saturday, the first report of his appearing in public since April 11. His absence fueled a flurry of speculation about his health and whereabouts, with a South Korean news outlet reporting Kim had undergone heart surgery.

Seoul's National Intelligence Service (NIS) said at a meeting with members of the parliamentary intelligence committee that the reports were "groundless," Yonhap said.

"He was normally performing his duties when he was out of the public eye," committee member Kim

Byung-kee was quoted as saying. But the lawmaker said Kim Jong Un only made 17 public appearances so far this year, compared with an average of 50 from previous years, which the NIS ascribed to a possible coronavirus outbreak in North Korea.

North Korea has said it has no confirmed cases. South Korea's Unification Minister Kim Yeon-chul, who oversees North Korea affairs, has said Kim's public disappearance was not particularly unusual because the country had been taking stringent steps to head off an outbreak.

"It cannot be ruled out that there is an outbreak in North Korea," the lawmaker Kim Byung-kee said, according to Yonhap.

"Kim Jong Un had focused on consolidating internal affairs such as military forces and party-state meetings, and coronavirus concerns have further limited his public activity."

News in Brief

LONDON (AFP) -- Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Wednesday made his first appearance in parliament since being hospitalized for coronavirus, the day after Britain became the European country worst hit by the global pandemic. He faced a new adversary in Keir Starmer, who was elected leader of the main opposition Labour party on April 4 and has called for a "national consensus" on how Britain tackles the outbreak. Health ministry figures on Tuesday showed 29,427 people with COVID-19 have died in Britain, while broader official data put the toll above 32,000 -- making the country second only to the United States in world rankings. Johnson was quizzed on why things have gone so wrong during his first weekly prime minister's questions (PMQs) in the House of Commons since March 25. MPs asked about how Britain will end a nationwide stay-at-home order introduced six weeks ago, which has successfully slowed the spread of the virus.

BEIJING (AFP) -- Chinese youngsters in the global virus epicenter of Wuhan filed back to class on Wednesday, wearing masks and walking in single file past thermal scanners. Senior school students in 121 institutions were back in front of chalk boards and digital displays for the first time since their city -- the ground zero of the coronavirus pandemic -- shut down in January. "School is finally reopening!" posted one user of Weibo, China's Twitter-like short messaging platform. "This is the first time that I'm so happily to go back to school, although I have to sit a monthly examination on the 8th." Teenagers sat at individual desks spaced a meter (3.3 feet) apart, seeing their teachers in the flesh after months of distance learning. Wednesday's back-to-school was the latest step in a gradual normalizing of life in Wuhan and surrounding Hubei province. The city, where the coronavirus appeared late last year before spreading around the world, was locked down for 76 days and only reopened last month.

SEOUL (AFP) -- South Korea returned largely to normal Wednesday as workers went back to offices, and museums and libraries reopened under eased social distancing rules after new coronavirus cases dropped to a trickle. The South endured one of the worst early outbreaks of the disease outside China and while it never imposed a compulsory lockdown, strict social distancing had been widely observed since March. But the South appears to have brought its outbreak under control thanks to an extensive "trace, test and treat" program that has drawn widespread praise. In a population of 51 million, its death toll is little more than 250, and new cases have slowed to just a handful -- 13 in the past three days, all of them arriving international passengers. More than 90 of the South's imported cases are returning citizens.

SYDNEY (Reuters) -- A delayed rotation of U.S. Marines to a base in Australia's northern city of Darwin will go ahead based on strict adherence to COVID-19 measures, Australia's defense minister said after speaking with her U.S. counterpart. Up to 2,500 U.S. Marines had been scheduled to arrive in April, in a major defense alliance cooperation exercise, but this was postponed in March because of the coronavirus pandemic. The remote Northern Territory, which has recorded just 30 COVID-19 cases, closed its borders to international and interstate visitors in March, and any arrivals must now undergo mandatory quarantine for 14 days.

VATICAN CITY (Reuters) -- Pope Francis said on Wednesday employers must respect the dignity of workers, particularly migrants, despite economic difficulties brought on by the coronavirus crisis. "It's true that the crisis is affecting everyone but the dignity of people must always be respected," Francis said at the end of his general audience, held from the papal library instead of St Peter's Square because of the lockdown in Italy. He said he had received numerous messages about labor problems on May 1, the day most countries celebrate workers' rights. He made particular mention of the exploitation of farmworkers in Italy, most of whom are migrants. In recent weeks, there has been a series of arrests in Italy of farm owners and gangmasters who recruit and supervise field workers. The gangmasters were in most cases also migrants. Last week, three farm owners and a Gambian migrant were arrested on charges of exploiting about 50 migrant farmworkers in the southern Puglia region.

WARSAW (Reuters) -- Poland may need to dissolve parliament and hold a snap election unless lawmakers allow a presidential vote, which the government wants to hold by postal ballot during the coronavirus crisis, the prime minister's chief of staff said on Wednesday. Polls show incumbent Andrzej Duda of the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party on course to win the presidential election, which was scheduled for May 10. But politicians have been bitterly divided over whether it is possible to stage the election during a pandemic that has put the country on lockdown. PiS wants the vote to go ahead this month, and has proposed a postal ballot to reduce the health risks from the coronavirus. But so far it has been unable to persuade parliament to back that proposal, with many lawmakers arguing that even voting by mail would be too dangerous. The upper house of parliament voted on Tuesday to reject a postal ballot. Poland's lower house, the Sejm, was expected to vote again on Wednesday or Thursday on the issue.

China: Pompeo Doesn't Have Any Virus Evidence

BEIJING (AFP) -- China on Wednesday hit back at U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo over his claims that the coronavirus originated in a lab in Wuhan, saying he "doesn't have any" evidence.

Pompeo said on Sunday that there was "enormous evidence" to show that the new coronavirus originated in a lab in China, further fueling tensions with Beijing over its handling of the outbreak.

"I think this matter should be handed to scientists and medical professionals, and not politicians, who lie for their own domestic political ends," said foreign ministry spokesman Hua Chunying at a regular press briefing.

"Mr Pompeo repeatedly spoke up but he cannot present any evidence. How can he? Because he doesn't have any," she said.

Pompeo said Sunday in an interview that there was "enormous evidence" that the new coronavirus came out of a Wuhan lab.

Most scientists believe the new virus, which emerged in China late last year, jumped from animals to humans -- possibly from a market in Wuhan selling exotic animals for meat.

The World Health Organization said the U.S. claims were "speculative".

The United States is the worst-hit country in the world, with more than 70,000 deaths.

Beijing has accused the U.S. of trying to divert attention

from its domestic handling of the outbreak. "We urge the US to stop... shifting the focus to China," Hua said.

"It should handle its domestic affairs properly first. The most important thing now is to control the U.S.' domestic pandemic spread and think of ways to save lives."

Warns Hong Kong Rioters

China also warned Hong Kong rioters it would not tolerate them "stirring up trouble again" in the semi-autonomous territory that was rocked by months of unrest last year.

"We noticed that the black violent forces slowed down a little when faced with the Hong Kong epidemic, but now they are stirring up trouble again," China's top body overseeing Hong Kong said in a statement, referring to the black clothing worn by many of the rioters.

"The central government will not sit idly by and watch these insane and wantonly destructive forces," said the State Council's Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office, adding that protesters wanted to "drag Hong Kong off a cliff".

The statement came after Hong Kong's economy posted its worst-ever quarterly decline of 8.9 percent, pushing the territory deeper into recession.

Riots began in June last year, triggered by opposition to a bill that would have allowed extraditions to mainland China where courts are controlled by the Communist Party.