

Huge Crowds Mark Festival in India as Virus Surges



Devotees gather to take a holy dip in the waters of river Ganges during Kumbh Mela, or the Pitcher Festival, amidst the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), in Haridwar, India, April 12, 2021.

NEW DELHI (Dispatches) — **Hundreds of thousands of Hindu devotees flocked on Monday to take a holy bath in India's Ganges river, even as the nation racked up the world's highest tally of new daily coronavirus infections.**

With 168,912 new cases, India accounts for one in six of all new infections globally, although the figure is still well below the U.S. peak of nearly 300,000 new cases on Jan. 8.

In the northern city of Haridwar, nearly a million devotees thronged the banks of the Ganges, a river many Hindus consider holy, to participate in the months-long 'Kumbh Mela' or pitcher festival.

"The crowd here is surging...the police are continuously appealing to people to maintain social distancing," police official Sanjay Gunjyal told Reuters at the site.

Critics of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party say the festival has been allowed at a time when infections are skyrocketing because the government isn't willing to anger Hindus, who are the party's biggest supporters.

With the surge showing no sign of slowing, India's confirmed infections since the pandemic began surpassed Brazil's total on Monday to make it the

second-worst hit country in the world.

The current surge has hit hardest in Western Maharashtra state, home to the financial capital Mumbai. The state has accounted for nearly half of the country's new infections in the past two weeks.

Health experts had appealed for the festival to be canceled, but the government went ahead saying safety rules would be followed. There are concerns that pilgrims could get infected and then take the virus back to their cities and villages in other parts of the country.

Authorities in Haridwar said the length of the festival has been shortened from previous years, but it has been extremely difficult to implement social distancing measures. Coronavirus tests are mandatory for those entering the area.

Government critics have compared the government's response to the festival to the response last year when Indian Muslims faced rising Islamophobia following accusations that an initial surge in infections was tied to a three-day meeting of an Islamic missionary group, the Tablighi Jamaat, in New Delhi.

Some leaders from Modi's party and India's freewheeling TV channels, which have long favored the government's Hindu-nationalist policies, labeled Muslims as "jihadis" and "super spreaders" in March 2020 when the seven-day rolling average of coronavirus cases in the country was not even 200 per day. The blame triggered a wave of violence, business boycotts and hate speech toward Muslims.

60th Anniversary of First Man in Space: Gagarin Honored



In this undated file photo, Soviet cosmonaut Major Yuri Gagarin, first man to orbit the earth, is shown in his space suit.

MOSCOW (AP) — **Crushed into the pilot's seat by heavy G-forces, Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin saw flames outside his spacecraft and prepared to die. His voice broke the tense silence at ground control: "I'm burning. Goodbye, comrades."**

Gagarin didn't know that the blazing inferno he observed through a porthole was a cloud of plasma engulfing Vostok 1 during its re-entry into the Earth's atmosphere, and he was still on track to return safely.

It was his quiet composure under pressure that helped make him the first human in space 60 years ago.

Gagarin's steely self-control was a key factor behind the success of his pioneering 108-minute flight. The

April 12, 1961, mission encountered glitches and emergencies — from a capsule hatch failing to shut properly just before blastoff to parachute problems in the final moments before touchdown.

From the time 20 Soviet air force pilots were selected to train for the first crewed spaceflight, Gagarin's calm demeanor, quick learning skills and beaming smile made him an early favorite.

Two days before blastoff, the 27-year-old Gagarin wrote a farewell letter to his wife, Valentina, sharing his pride in being chosen to ride in Vostok 1 but also trying to console her in the event of his death.

"I fully trust the equipment, it mustn't let me down. But if some-

thing happens, I ask you Valyusha not to become broken by grief," he wrote, using a nickname for her.

Authorities held onto the letter and eventually gave it to Gagarin's widow seven years later after he died in an airplane crash. She never remarried.

Gagarin's pioneering, single-orbit flight made him a hero in the Soviet Union and an international celebrity. After putting the world's first satellite into orbit with the successful launch of Sputnik in October 1957, the Soviet space program, rushed to secure its dominance over the United States by putting a man into space.

"The task was set, and people were sleeping in their offices and factory shops, like at wartime," Fyodor Yurchikhin, a Russian cosmonaut who eventually made five spaceflights, recalled.

As the Soviet rocket and space program raced to beat the Americans, it suffered a series of launch failures throughout 1960, including a disastrous launch pad explosion in October that killed 126 people. Missile Forces chief Marshal Mitrofan Nedelin was among the victims.

"The colossal propaganda effect of the Sputnik launch and particularly Gagarin's flight was very important," Moscow-based aviation and space expert Vadim Lukashevich said. "We suddenly beat America even though our country hadn't recovered yet from the massive damage and casualties" from World War II.

Merkel Rallies Behind Laschet's Chancellorship Bid

BERLIN (AP) — **The leadership of Chancellor Angela Merkel's party on Monday backed party chairman Armin Laschet's bid to become the center-right candidate for Germany's next leader, one of his deputies said — giving him an advantage after he and a rival both declared their ambitions.**

The Union bloc aims to decide quickly on its candidate after months of shadow-boxing between Laschet, the head of Merkel's Christian Democratic Union, and Markus Soeder, who leads its smaller Bavaria-only sister party, the Christian Social Union.

Laschet and Soeder — the governors of Germany's two most populous states, North Rhine-Westphalia and Bavaria respectively — both officially declared on Sunday that they're prepared to run, but insisted that they will quickly find a harmonious solution. They didn't specify how they will do so.

The leaderships of the CDU and the CSU are holding separate meetings on Monday. Volker Bouffier, the governor of Hesse state and a deputy party leader, said the CDU's top leadership backed Laschet's candidacy, though it didn't make a formal decision.

"We expressed clear support for our leader and made clear that we consider him exceptionally well-suited, and asked him to discuss the way forward together with Markus So-

eder," Bouffier said. He added that the party wants a decision within a week.

The CDU's local branch in Berlin, which is relatively weak, backed Soeder. It was unclear how many others in the party might come out for the Bavarian leader.

Laschet's support in the CDU is a decisive factor because his is by far the bigger of the two parties. It runs in 15 of Germany's 16 states, while the CSU runs only in Bavaria.

Soeder said Sunday he is ready to run "if the CDU — which is the bigger sister, that's very clear — supports this broadly." He added that "it's also clear that if the big sister says that's not its proposal and it has a different proposal ... we would accept that."

Soeder, 54, said the candidate should be the one with the best chances in the Sept. 26 election, in which Merkel isn't seeking a fifth term after 16 years in power. That underlines a weakness for Laschet — current polls show much better ratings for Soeder, who has cultivated an image as a decisive backer of tough action in the coronavirus pandemic.

Laschet, 60, was elected as CDU leader in January and hasn't enjoyed a honeymoon, most recently garnering criticism for appearing to dither over how to manage a resurgence in virus cases. Last month, the CDU suffered bad losses in two state elections.

Top US CEOs Rake In Hefty COVID-19 Dividends



People sit outside the New York Stock Exchange, before the exchange suspending trading of securities due to an unknown computer glitch.

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) — **America's top CEOs increased their earnings during the Covid pandemic, despite incomes for many actually falling, according to a report.**

The median pay for 322 executives was \$13.7 million (£9.9 million) in 2020 — a rise of \$1.1 million on the year before, The Wall Street Journal found.

Increases in CEO pay during the pandemic were reported at 206 of the 322 companies reviewed by the Journal. It included the take home pay of CEOs at Starbucks, Walgreens and Amtrak, among other well-known companies.

Although not all of the 322 companies recorded a profit during the pandemic, the median pay increase for America's top CEOs was 15 percent in 2020, The Journal reported.

It comes despite many CEOs forgoing almost 90 percent of their overall compensation packages, of which 10 percent is typically salary.

A rebounding stock market was cited by The Journal as a reason for the increase in pay, with many CEOs able to profit from shares that form a part of their compensation packages.

In fact, The Journal found that ex-

ecutives with the biggest pay packages during the pandemic were those who were given special stock awards.

That was the founder and CEO of Paycom, Chad Richison, and the CEO of General Electric, Larry Culp, who received \$211 million (£153 million) and \$73 (£53) million in 2020, respectively.

Jeff Bezos, the Amazon founder, as well as Tesla founder Elon Musk and Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, are among a number of millionaires whose profits also increased in 2020, according to a report by Oxfam.

The boost in profits for big corporations follows a downturn in the country's economy of 3.5 percent of GDP last year, in what was the biggest fall since the end of the Second World War — although it is expected to return to pre-Covid levels this year.

The U.S. employment market is also short of roughly 8.4 million jobs, with the current unemployment rate at 6.2 percent nationally.

Millions of Americans, meanwhile, have depended on direct relief from the federal government, with 46 percent of low income adults surveyed by Pew saying they found it difficult paying bills in 2020, due to the fall-out from Covid.

Ukraine: Putin Refusing to Talk to Zelenskiy on Donbass



From L: Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, French President Emmanuel Macron and Russian President Vladimir Putin arrive for a meeting with German Chancellor at the Elysee Palace, on Dec. 9, 2019 in Paris.

KYIV (Dispatches) — **Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy has not yet been able to speak to his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin to discuss the escalating conflict in eastern Ukraine despite lodging a request to do so, Zelenskiy's spokeswoman said on Monday.**

Kyiv and Moscow have traded blame over the worsening situation in the eastern Donbass region, where Ukrainian troops have battled pro-Russian forces in a conflict Kyiv says has killed 14,000 people since 2014.

Iuliia Mendel, Zelenskiy's spokeswoman, told Reuters on Monday the Ukrainian leader had so far tried and failed to speak to Putin about the matter.

"The president's office, of course, made a request to speak with Vladimir Putin. We have not received an answer yet and we very much hope that this is not a refusal of dialogue," said Mendel. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said he had not seen such a request for talks "in recent days" and was unaware one had been recently made.

When asked if Putin had anything to say to Zelenskiy, Peskov said he hoped that what he called "political wisdom" would prevail in Kyiv when it came to de-escalating and avoiding a potential war.

Mendel said Russia had massed more than 40,000 troops on Ukraine's eastern border and more than 40,000 troops in Crimea.

Those figures are higher than those previously claimed by the head of Ukraine's armed forces to parliament in March.

Zelenskiy is due to head to Paris for talks on Russia's troop build-up and the escalating conflict in Donbass, she added.

A meeting between Zelenskiy and French President Emmanuel Macron is expected by the end of this week.

Ukraine claims the Kremlin is possibly engineering a crisis to rally Russians around a foreign enemy ahead of parliamentary elections in September and shift the narrative away from domestic irritants such as jailed pro-Western blogger Alexei Navalny, its security chief told Reuters last week.

Putin on Friday accused Ukraine of "dangerous provocative actions" in the Donbass region. The Kremlin says Russia is free to move forces around its own territory as it sees fit for defensive purposes.

The standoff has sparked concern from Ukraine's Western backers. Washington and the NATO alliance have accused Russia of a "provocative" build-up.

News in Brief

MOGADISHU (Reuters) — Mogadishu's police chief announced he had suspended parliament on Monday, saying he was acting unilaterally to prevent lawmakers from extending the president's term, only to be fired moments later by the police commissioner. "We have stopped the parliament session today. We have a responsibility bigger than a personal one. We have to solve anything that can bring violence and war in Mogadishu," Sadaq Omar Hassan told local television station Universal in a live speech. "The four-year term has ended." Moments later, Somalia's police commissioner Hassan Mohamed Hajar, announced on Facebook that Hassan had been fired and replaced. The chaos underscores the widening divisions within the Horn of Africa's security services over extending the four-year term of President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, who faces growing pressure to quit after his term as national leader ended in February.

QUITO, Ecuador (AP) — A conservative businessman seemed headed to Ecuador's presidency, with voters rejecting the leftist movement started by former President Rafael Correa more than a decade ago. And in neighboring Peru, a crowded field of 18 presidential candidates was virtually certain to result in a second round of voting in June. The South American nations held elections Sunday under strict public health measures amid a recent spike in COVID-19 cases and the return of lockdowns. Peruvians also elected a new Congress. The Electoral Council in Ecuador did not declare a winner in the contest to replace President Lenin Moreno next month, but results released by the agency showed former banker Guillermo Lasso with about 53% of votes and leftist Andrés Arauz with 47%, with over 93% of votes counted. Arauz had led the first round of voting with more than 30% on Feb. 7, while Lasso edged into the final by finishing about a half percentage point ahead of environmentalist and Indigenous candidate Yaku Pérez. Arauz conceded the election and so did his main backer, Correa, who remains a force in Ecuador while living in self-exile in Belgium. Moreno was also an ally of Correa but turned against him while in office. "Sincerely, we believed we would win, but our projections were wrong," Correa tweeted. "Good luck to Guillermo Lasso, his success will be that of Ecuador. I only ask you to stop the lawfare, which destroys lives and families."

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The woman arrested on suspicion of killing her three young children at her Los Angeles apartment had been involved in a custody dispute with their father, according to a newspaper report Sunday. Liliana Carrillo, 30, was arrested Saturday in Tulare County after fleeing the gruesome scene and leading law enforcement officers on a long-distance chase, authorities said. The Los Angeles Times cites family court documents that show Eric Denton sought custody of the children — ages 3, 2 and 6 months — on March 1. Denton requested a temporary emergency visitation order from the court on March 4 and petitioned for a mental health evaluation of Carrillo, according to the newspaper. Orders were drawn up at a March 26 hearing. Another hearing in the case was scheduled for April 14. In response, Carrillo sought a temporary domestic violence restraining order against Denton on March 12 in Los Angeles County Superior Court, documents show.

TOKYO (AP) — Tokyo adopted tougher measures against the coronavirus Monday as it struggles to curb the rapid spread of a more contagious variant ahead of the Olympics in a country where less than 1% of people have been vaccinated. Japan started its vaccination drive with medical workers and expanded Monday to older residents, with the first shots being given in about 120 selected places around the country. The tougher COVID-19 rules, just three weeks after a state of emergency ended in the capital, allow Tokyo's governor to mandate shorter opening hours for bars and restaurants, punish violators and compensate those who comply. The measures remain through May 11. The status was also raised for Kyoto in western Japan and the southern island prefecture of Okinawa, where cases have surged in recent weeks. The near-emergency status there is to continue through May 5, the end of Japan's "Golden Week" holidays, to discourage traveling.

NATPYITAW (Dispatches) — Myanmar's ousted leader Aung San Suu Kyi on Monday was handed fresh criminal charges as a heavy-handed crackdown against her supporters continues across the country. Suu Kyi "has been charged again under section 25 of the natural disaster management law," Suu Kyi's lawyer Min Min Soe said after she took part via a video link in an online court hearing in the capital Naypyitaw. "She has been charged in six cases altogether — five charges in Naypyitaw and one in Yangon," the lawyer pointed out. In one of the bloodiest days of the unrest so far, more than 80 protesters were killed by security forces in the southern city of Bago on Friday. More than 700 civilians have been killed in the space of just 70 days since the coup, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners monitoring group.